

# Over the Line 2016

## Chapter 1



Khal walked into the school library and stood with his back against the newspaper rack. He wanted to see who else was in the room. Because this was no normal library class. This was a meeting of all the children who – in two weeks – would be going on a school trip Battlefield tour of France. And none of his mates had signed up for it.

He saw two lads from Year 8 that he knew from the football squad. Jake and Hamid, but no one from his class. He did recognise one girl from his primary school. Grace Evans. But he'd not spoken to Grace since they started high school.

Khal knew the teacher well, though. Mr Clarke. Head of history and the school football coach. Tall. Muscular. Moustached.

As Khal waited he picked up a newspaper, turning straight to the back page. It was football. All football. And that suited Khal. Match reports on the weekend's Euro 2016 games. News about City maybe signing new players.

Wales winning. England drawing. Northern Ireland losing. The match report about England was all about how England had failed to hold on to win. But Khal thought England had been great, not failed. Especially Rooney. Some of those passes he'd played had been perfect. And Eric Dier's goal. Awesome. Khal started to scan the rest of the Euro 2016 news, utterly engrossed.

'Khalid?' Mr Clarke's deep voice came from the other end of the library. 'Are you going to stay out in No Man's Land for the duration?'

Khal put the newspaper down and walked towards the only chair now available. Next to Grace. Sitting, he noticed she was wearing a discreet Wales football badge. He'd forgotten she was Welsh. Khal smiled. Maybe they could have some banter together about Thursday's Wales v England game.

And Mr Clarke began to take them through details of the school trip. They'd leave on Sunday 26th June. For a week. They'd visit a battlefield called Delville Wood in the Somme area of France. Stay in the same girls' school building where First World War soldiers were billeted a hundred years before.

'Now, look behind you,' Mr Clarke instructed.

All 30 children turned to look at an oil painting above the library desk. Of a tall, bald, thin man. Khal's attention was drawn to the man's clear blue eyes. His strong gaze. As if the man in the painting was trying to outstare them all.

'That,' Mr Clarke informed them, 'if you didn't know, is Lieutenant William Barker, former head of this school. What do we know about Barker?'





The hand next to Khal went up. Grace.

‘He was headteacher of this school from 1923 to 1939, sir.’

‘And?’

‘He fought in the First World War, sir. He won the Military Cross.’

Khal rolled his eyes. Grace had been like this at primary school. All knowing. All boring.

‘And he played football for City before the war, sir,’ Grace finished.

Khal turned in his seat to stare at Grace. ‘He what?’

Mr Clarke took up the story.

William Barker had been a member of the Footballers’ Battalion. 1,600 soldiers made up of footballers and football fans. Including players from Chelsea, Liverpool and Leeds United.

‘That painting, children,’ Mr Clarke said, ‘and this school’s history, is why our Battlefield Tour is going to the places where the Footballers’ Battalion fought and – in many cases – fell. We are going to be visiting the battlefields, the memorials and graves of the men Lieutenant William Barker fought alongside.’

There was quiet in the library now. No chat. No fidgeting. Even the photocopier had stopped whirring. That thing that always happens when someone talks about the First World War.

‘I want each of you to do a piece of research before we go,’ Mr Clarke went on. ‘Find out more about the Footballers’ Battalion. Try to discover something that nobody else knows. You need to work in pairs. And some of you will give a presentation to Years 7 and 8 when we come back from France.’

Khal stood quickly to catch the eye of Jake or Hamid. But it was clear that they were already a pair. In fact, it seemed everyone was matched up. Khal looked at Grace, who was shyly studying the papers in front of her. His dad’s voice came into his head. Treat people with respect. Whoever they are. However you feel about them. Always respect.

Grace looked up.

Khal had no choice. ‘Partners?’ he asked.

Grace smiled. ‘I know where there’s something no one else has seen,’ she said quietly.

‘Upstairs. In the school archive. Let’s just wait until everyone else has gone.’

The archive in the small attic above the library was warm. It was lit by a single naked bulb. There were two rows of metal shelves holding papers in boxes and scrolls. A trestle table. Also, what looked like the end of a wooden propeller.

‘This is it,’ Grace said, lifting a heavy box onto the trestle table.

They found two files of paper in the box. A thick one with photographs of footballers and soldiers from a hundred years ago. Also lists and exercise books filled with writing.





‘So these are William Barker’s notes?’ Khal asked.

Grace nodded. ‘Yes. I’ve never looked at them. But I knew they were up here. The school librarian told me about them.’

The second, thinner, file surprised Khal. It had photographs of German soldiers and German words. He recognised some of them. All Year 7 had been learning German. But Khal put them aside. It was the British players he was interested in.

‘Come on,’ Grace said. ‘Let’s take them downstairs. We’re not really allowed up here.’

Grace led the way. Down the creaking steps.

Khal passed her the file about the Footballers’ Battalion and started to make his way down the first five or six steps. As he descended he took one last look at the attic archive.

That was when his heart stopped. For a moment.

Because Khal had seen a man up there.

A man wearing heavy trousers and a jacket. High leather boots. A helmet with a spike on top. He was squatting, leaning on a rifle with a long bayonet fixed to its end. He was looking up at Khal. At the same time Khal could smell something like matches or candles.

Then the light went out.

Khal gripped the sides of the ladder. Had he really just seen a soldier? In the archive?

‘Grace,’ he shouted. ‘Switch it on!’

The light came back on immediately.

‘What’s the matter?’ Grace called up. ‘Are you okay?’

Khal looked around the attic. Nothing. No man. No fire. No smoke. His heart began to slow down a little. He shook his head, walked down the steps.

Khal felt weird. His head ached. His throat was dry.

‘Are you okay?’ Grace said. There was a look on her face. Like she knew he’d seen something up there.

‘No. I mean yes. I’m fine. I’ll see you l... later.’

Khal walked quickly out of the library. ‘I have to go,’ he added as he left. ‘I want to watch Ireland v Sweden. It kicks off at five.’ But that was not the reason he was rushing off. The *real* reason was what he had seen in the attic.

**Chapter two will be published at [www.literacytrust.org.uk/euro-2016](http://www.literacytrust.org.uk/euro-2016) before 7.30am on Tuesday 14 June.**



# Over the Line 2016

## Chapter 2



Dinner time at the Maliks. Six p.m.

Khal, his parents and his younger sister were sat around the table in their cellar kitchen.

‘But mum,’ Khal moaned. ‘It’s only half time in the Ireland match. Can we have dinner in the front room? It’s still 0-0. Please. Just this once.’

‘No, Khalid,’ his mum said calmly. ‘We always eat together at the table. As you know. Not even your wonderful football tournament will stop that.’

Khal frowned.

‘No Khalid. No! No! No!’

The second voice was not his mother’s. It was Khal’s sister, Amani, who was leaning across the table mocking him.

‘Shut up, Amani,’ Khal muttered.

But his sister wouldn’t shut up. Amani kept trying to agitate Khal during the meal, asking if he wondered what the score was, or if he was worried he’d miss an important goal.

Khal knew inside that he shouldn’t fight back. Because, if he did, his mum would get cross with him, not her. No, the best thing to do was to change the subject. And to choose a subject that would shut his sister up for good. And the best subject for that was school.

That worked on his parents. Every time.

Khal looked around the room. At the new cabinets and the butcher’s block they’d recently had fitted in the kitchen. The row of cup on hooks, including his own England mug.

‘We’ve been given a project at school,’ Khal volunteered, just as Amani was about start up again.

His mum sat up in her seat. ‘Good. A project. What is it?’

Khal saw he now had his dad’s attention too.

‘We’ve been asked to find out about some footballers who fought in the First World War. And I’m doing William Barker. He was a City player and he fought in the Footballer’s Battalion.’

As Khal spoke the lights in the kitchen flickered off and on a couple of times.

‘Your school’s former head teacher?’ Dad asked, frowning at the lights. ‘That’s interesting. I’d like to know more.’

‘Wooooo,’ Amani said. ‘Spooooooky lights.’

‘Be quiet, Amani,’ Mum snapped.







Khal smiled. This was working. 'William Barker was amazing,' he said. 'Grace showed me some of his papers. We're going to work on them together.'

'Grace from your old school?' Mum asked.

'Yes,' Khal said, glancing at Amani who was grinning again. Not a good sign.

'Will you be working together?' Dad asked. 'Is she going on the Battlefield Tour too?'

Khal nodded. Just as the lights flickered again.

'Khally's got a girlfriend,' Amani sang. 'Khally's got a girlfriend.'

But Khal ignored his sister: the lights' flickering had him worried. Flickering lights were the kind of thing that happened when there were ghosts in children's stories. Stuff like that.

Khal put his head down and ate.

Khal and his dad were the only ones watching Italy v Belgium. Khal had been delighted when Amani had been sent for an early bath because she was being so irritating.

Khal. His Dad. Football. This was good. Even though his dad had a huge pile of paperwork he was working through.

Khal settled back, feet up, and got into the game. Italy on top. Some Belgium players he knew really well from the Premier League: Hazard, Lukaku, Fellaini.

It was tight. It was tense. Lots of whistling in the crowd.

And then Giaccherini was through, controlling the ball with one foot, burying it with the other.

Goal!

Khal clapped. His dad did too, as he watched the replay of the goal.

And then Khal leant forward, squinting at the screen.

Who was that?

He'd seen someone.

In the crowd.

After staring at the screen in a daze, his mind trying to work it out, Khal grabbed the remote and rewind.

It was just after the goal. The camera had panned across the celebrating Italy fans. One of them with a large red, white and green flag. But, in amongst it all, Khal had seen one person *not* celebrating. Dressed all in grey.

Khal rewind and watched the images in the crowd several times. But the figure wasn't there anymore.





‘What’s up?’ his dad said.

‘Nothing,’ Khal replied quickly, watching the replay again. ‘It’s okay.’

But it wasn’t okay. Because Khal was convinced that the figure he’d seen was the soldier from the school archive. In the crowd. Staring out at him. Surrounded by jubilant Italians.

Khal felt his dad’s eyes on him.

And he wondered for a moment, should he tell his dad?

No. His dad had enough to worry about with his pile of paperwork.

Khal would ask his mates. That was it.

Onto Instagram. Direct group message to Gregor and Fraser.

*You watchin the match?’*

*Yeah.*

*Did u c those Italians after the goal?*

*Yeah.*

*And the soldier guy stood with them?*

*Nah. Why?*

*Oh nothing.*

Khal put his phone down and carried on watching the match. He tried to look calm, but he wasn’t. He felt a surge of energy rushing through his chest and arms. Not a nice energy, either. And he realised he was panicking.

Khal breathed in and out slow and deep three times. Something his dad had taught him to calm himself down. It was worth a try.

‘Seriously,’ Dad said, his pen poised above his page, looking quizzically at his son. ‘Whatever it is, if you want to talk to me, I’m here one hundred percent.’

Khal smiled. ‘Thanks Dad. I’m okay.’

And he wondered again, should he talk to his dad? Maybe. Yet something held him back. But Khal knew he needed to talk to someone.

But who?

Who could he tell that he’d seen a man in the archive of the school library and that the kitchen lights flickered twice during dinner and that when Giaccherini scored for Italy he thought he saw the soldier again in the crowd, staring at him and that, because of all those things, he was starting to feel really weird and panicky about it?

Who?





They'd think he was crazy.

They'd think he was nuts.

All of them.

And then a name came into Khal's mind. A name of someone he *could* talk to.

Grace.

He'd tell Grace.

*She'd* listen. She might even be able to offer him some advice. She was clever. She always had been. And he felt like he could trust her.

Yes. That's what he'd do. Tomorrow.

Then, immediately, Khal started to doubt himself. Started to think his plan through.

He had already worked out two reasons why he shouldn't tell Grace.

One, he barely knew her anymore.

Two, she was a girl. And if his mates saw him talking to her too much they'd be worse than Amani winding him up.

Khal tried the breathing thing again.

Quietly. So his dad didn't hear him.

But the panic was still rising. And rising. And rising. And Khal knew he would have to do something to sort himself out.



# Over the Line 2016

## Chapter 3



Khal arrived at school early. He walked along the main corridor, past some of the old classrooms towards the library. His plan was to talk to Grace about the soldier he had glimpsed in the attic. But the nearer he got to the library, the slower his pace became.

Doubts.

That she'd think he was crazy.

That he didn't really know her anymore.

And what was he going to tell her, anyway? Did he really think he was seeing things?

Khal stopped outside one of the old classrooms and tried to work out if he should walk on, or turn round. He closed his eyes and sighed. Opened them again.

Then he saw the boy. Alone in the classroom, writing something in a book. But Khal smelled the smell first. Candles. Electrical burning. Toast. Something like that. That's what alerted him to look into the room.

The boy was wearing an old fashioned school uniform. Shorts to his knees. A cap. Looking down at his desk, until he glanced up at Khal. And then – to Khal's horror – the boy began to flicker like a light going on and off, like the lights the night before at home.

Khal ducked below the window. His heart hammering. His head aching. What was that?

He waited, his thoughts paralysed.

Eventually, Khal lifted his head so that he could see through the door's glass panel. Flinching, he peered into the room.

It was empty.

'Grace?' Khal staggered into the library.

'Hey Khalid.'

Grace was behind the library desk, opening books on the title page for the librarian, Mrs Carnegie.

'I need to talk to you,' Khal said, aware his voice sounded stressed.







‘About the project? I thought you’d gone off the idea of working with me,’ she teased. ‘I just need to help Mrs C. I’ll be a minute.’

Khal could feel Mrs C weighing him up. Sensing he needed Grace now. Not her.

‘It’s okay, love,’ the librarian said. ‘We can do this later.’

Grace led Khal to the table next to the newspaper rack. Khal overlooked headlines he would normally have wanted to read. About the Euros. But they meant nothing to him this morning.

‘Are you okay?’ Grace asked.

‘No.’

Grace leaned forward. ‘What is it?’

‘I keep seeing things.’

‘Okay.’ Grace smiled.

Khal knew she half thought he was joking.

‘No really,’ he insisted. ‘I saw a soldier in the attic that day we went up. I saw him last night on the TV too. I saw a boy in a classroom down there and he was flickering. And the lights are going funny in my house.’

Grace looked at Khal. She put her hand on his shoulder. Just as Jake and Hamid came in.

Khal stood up, confused, panicked, pushing Grace’s hand away.

He regretted it already. But it was done.

Jake and Hamid were eyeing the pair quizzically.

Time seemed to stop.

Khal couldn’t just say nothing.

‘Eh, lads,’ Khal heard himself shout across the library. ‘Grace thinks Wales are going to beat England. How crazy is *she*?’

‘What?’ he heard Grace say in a small voice.

‘Bale’s a donkey,’ Khal shouted next, loathing himself.

He heard Jake and Hamid laughing, as they wandered out of the library. Saw Grace step back, her open face closing down.

They stood there facing each other. And Khal could find nothing to say. Nothing to make it better. He was an idiot.





‘Everything okay, Grace?’ Khal heard the librarian say.

‘I’m just coming, Mrs C,’ Grace said stonily, walking past Khal without looking at him.

He waited until she had disappeared then left the library.

Khal felt terrible as he walked home. He had that feeling that everything in his life was piling up on top of him and that there was nowhere to turn.

His dad was in the driveway when he arrived at his house, carrying a small bag of shopping from Iceland.

‘Hi Dad,’ Khal muttered. ‘You’re home early.’

‘Thought we could watch both matches together. You up for that?’

Khal nodded.

They sat down in the front room. Both on the sofa. Feet up on the footstool. Side by side.

His dad had bought chocolate milk and popcorn. A strange combo, but Khal liked both. And there was no pile of paperwork for his dad to work through tonight, which meant Khal didn’t have to share his dad with his work. And that felt good. Father and son watching the football, talking about the game and the players. Khal enjoyed it.

Occasionally thoughts about Grace and the strange events of the last couple of days came into his mind. But he managed to relax and forget about them as he watched the game and chatted with his dad.

It wasn’t until after Hungary had beaten Austria and the Portugal-Iceland match had started that his dad turned to him.

‘So, what’s going on Khalid? You’re not yourself tonight. Can I help?’

Khal thought about denying it. For a moment. But no. He had to talk. It was right thing to do.

‘It started on Monday,’ Khal confessed. Then he opened up. Told his dad everything.

His dad asked lots of questions that made Khal feel better. Mainly because Khal could see that he was being taken seriously.





‘Look,’ his dad said at the end of the conversation. ‘Strange things can happen sometimes. They might be in our heads. They might be real things from the past. Nobody really knows. I think the more you can understand about what happened the more you can understand how you are feeling now. Perhaps you are nervous about going to France? It could be that? Just know that I’m here every minute of every day if you need to talk. Even if you need to come out of school to do it. Okay?’

‘Thanks Dad,’ Khal said. Then they watched the last half hour of Portugal against Iceland. It was fun to see Ronaldo getting more and more frustrated.

By the end Khal and his dad were firm Iceland supporters.

Khal went to bed feeling better. Much better. He settled into his bed and began to read through some of the documents he and Grace had borrowed from the archive at school. Records of the Footballers’ Battalion time at the war. Photographs. Letters. Newspaper clippings. If he could read them then he’d have something to talk to Grace about. Then she might forgive him for how he had been earlier today. He wanted to make that right. And he wanted to find a link between the things in the documents and what had been happening to him too. If he could.

One clipped-together set of sheets had on it what was called a Battalion Diary. The record of what had happened to the men of the Footballers’ Battalion each day during the First World War. The battalion that the school’s old headteacher, William Barker, had fought in. Short entries. Handwritten. Khal imagined the man who wrote these, cowering in a trench during the First World War, as bombs fell and bullets whizzed over his head.

Was there some clue there for him? In this diary?

He’d been reading for a few minutes when he heard a low moaning sound coming from the window. At first it sounded just like a general noise, then he heard a word.

‘Khaleeed. Khaleeeeeeeed.’

Khal sat bolt upright, swallowed, and gripped the edges of his bed.

‘WHAT!’ he shouted. ‘WHO?’

He could barely breathe. This was it. Whoever he’d seen at school had come for him. Was it because he was reading the Battalion Diary? He threw it to the floor.





Then laughter. And his mum bursting into his room, sweeping back the curtain, revealing Amani, his sister, doubled over, laughing and pointing at his brother.

Khal listened to his sister being told off like she'd never been told off before. When everything was quiet his dad came in and Khal asked if he could keep a light on, said it would help him sleep.

Dad had said that was fine.

But the light didn't help him sleep. He lay awake, uncomfortable and unhappy, running all his worries through his mind.

*Was it in his mind? All of this? Or was it the thought of going on the Battlefield Tour that was getting to him?*

*Or was it real? Was he being haunted by something or someone to do with his school and the First World War?*

Khal could have no idea that tomorrow he would have the answer to that question. In full. Loud and clear.

**After tomorrow's episode, you will be asked to vote on what happens next in the story. A major decision must be made. Clear instructions on how to vote by email will be included. Thank you very much for reading.**





# Over the Line 2016

## Chapter 4



*Warning to teachers. This chapter includes a section – on page 3 – where a footballer/soldier appears to be blown up. This happens in Khal's mind. You may want to check it before reading it aloud to Year 3 children. Thank you.*

Khal was on a football pitch in heavy boots. Playing for England against Wales. The mud was thick on the pitch. It was foggy. He had the ball at his feet, but, when he tried to run, he could barely move. He felt heavy. So heavy. And, then, he saw that the mud wasn't just under his feet. It was high on each side, like he was at the bottom of a deep hole. But it wasn't a hole. Khal knew that. He was in a trench, like the ones Mr Clarke, the history teacher, had shown them. He was in the war. There was a fizz-fizzing sound of bullets whipping through the air. Then Khal saw Grace standing at the end of the trench, looking away from him, like she was still cross. And, next to her, was Gareth Bale, his hands in the air because he'd just scored the winner against England.

Khal woke gasping for air, as if the mud had been coming down, suffocating him.

Had he cried out?

He didn't know.

This Battlefield Tour was getting to him. Haunting his nights as well as his days. That and the visions he was having and the thing with Grace and worrying about the England-Wales match tonight. It was too much.

Khal scrambled out of bed. These strange visions and dreams were defeating him. He had to do something about one of the things that was doing his head in. If he could solve one of them, maybe he'd feel better.

And he knew just where to start.





Khal waited outside school. He knew Grace would be in early. She always was – to do her bit at the library. As he waited by the long row of trees that led up to the school, Khal searched for the words he would say to her.

Be honest. That was always his dad's advice. Tell people what you mean in your heart and they will do the same to you.

*Grace. Look. It's no big deal. It's just the lads came in and...*

No. He couldn't say that. He still sounded rude.

*Grace, I can't be seen with a girl's hand on my shoulder...*

No. Not that either. Even more embarrassing.

*I'm sorry, Grace. I was rude. I was mean. I was just embarrassed because my friends came in. It was really childish of me. Please forgive me.*

Could he really say that to her? Maybe. It could work.

Then he saw her. Walking up the school path, weaving through the trees, her bag over her shoulder. Her face was blank as if she was deep in thought.

Khal stepped out in front of Grace.

She stopped. Her face shocked, then blank again.

'Hi,' Khal said.

'Hi.'

'I wanted to talk to you.'

'Did you?'

'Yeah.'

So far Grace had not walked away. That was good. She looked furious, but she was still here.

It was time. Say it now.

Khal's mouth felt dry. His heart was pumping. His legs felt like jelly. But he had to do this.

'I was stupid,' Khal said. 'I'm sorry. When my hand was... I mean when your hand was on my shoulder. When they came in I was... I felt... it was embarrassing.'





Grace raised an eyebrow.

'No,' Khal stumbled on. 'I mean... was embarrassed because they saw us. I mean me. And I'm sorry... it was rude of me and wish I could take it back, because I think you're my friend too.'

Grace smiled. 'That was clumsy,' she said.

Khal said nothing.

'But it means a lot,' Grace went on. 'Thanks.'

Khal sighed. What a relief.

'And if you want to see if Bale is a donkey,' Grace added. 'Wait until this afternoon. Wales are going to beat England.'

'No chance,' Khal laughed.

'Think about it,' Grace said. 'We beat Slovakia. Slovakia beat Russia. You only drew with Russia. That means we'll beat you.'

Khal was in history when it happened. There were a few of the pupils missing. Khal knew why. The school were not letting anyone watch the Wales v England match, which kicked off at 2 p.m. Those absent were pretending to be ill, so they could watch it at home.

The classroom was opposite the school sports fields, so if you stared out of the window instead of looking at Mr Clarke like you were meant to, you could see a whole football pitch and both goals.

There was a wind blowing, tossing the leafy trees around. Clouds scudding across the sky.

Khal studied the patches of mud on the pitch, remembering his dream and how awful it had been. He was thinking – in particular – about seeing Gareth Bale celebrating scoring a goal against England. And about Grace's prediction. He did not want England to lose to Wales.





As he gazed out at the football pitch he saw a lone man jogging after a ball, wearing long baggy shorts and with boots that looked huge. Khal guessed something weird was going to happen when he smelled burning again.

But he couldn't look away as the man on the pitch ran up to the heavy brown leather ball, pushed it forward, controlled it again, then swung his leg back to kick it into the net.

Khal watched like he always watched football pitches anywhere when there was a game on. Even one man kicking a ball at an empty goal needed watching. But he was aware of that smell again.

When the man struck the ball, he was flung instantly into the air as the ground beneath him shuddered and huge amounts of soil and grass and dust were thrown up, as well as smoke and flames.

Khal stood up, his chair thrust back and clattering behind him.

'KHALID! WHAT ARE YOU DOING?' Mr Clarke shouted.

But Khal ignored the teacher, instead watching the man on the pitch fall to the ground. Not wearing a football strip now, but a khaki soldier's uniform.

'KHALID?'

Khal could hear uproar around him. Kids shouting his name. Other laughing. The sound of banging on desks. Then his own voice shouting 'NOOOOOOOOOO.'

Then Khal was on the floor and the laughing had stopped and Mr Clarke's voice was soft and caring instead of hard and harsh and all the other children were utterly silent as they all filed out of the room.

After a while – Khal didn't know how long – his dad arrived to take him home, just an arm round his son as they walked to the car, seat-belted him in. The muttered voices of adults outside the car as he sat alone.

*'If he's not well, he doesn't have to go to France...'*

Then leaving the school, past the football pitch, Khal looked back to check if what he had seen was still there. It wasn't.

But he'd seen it. He knew he'd seen it.







Khal's dad didn't ask him many questions. He brought him home. Felt his forehead, pulse and checked his vision. Put him in the front room, a blanket by his side. Made him some food and drink. Put the Wales v England game on.

Khal stared at the screen. The big match. The showdown. It was time. England v Wales. It was huge. And here he was, unlike most of his mates, watching it at home, while they were doing Maths.

But, still, he felt like he was watching it from a million miles away. Because he was coming to understand something. All these things he'd been seeing. They were signs, not a threat. Signs that he had to do something, understand something. And that that had to happen in France on the Battlefield Tour.

But in the kitchen, Khal's dad was on the phone to Khal's mum.

'He's okay now,' Khal's dad said. 'But the school say he was very disturbed. He was shouting.'

'I'll come home as soon as I can,' Khal's mum said.

'Okay. See you then.'

'And when I get home from work we need to talk about whether we should let Khal leave for France or remain at home with us.'

'Yes, of course,' Khal's dad said. 'We have a decision to make.'

**We would now like you to make a decision that will have a huge impact on this story. This is your own referendum on Europe! Talk as a group or class and make a decision between you, then cast one vote for the class.**

Please visit [www.tompalmer.co.uk/first-world-war-literacy-resources](http://www.tompalmer.co.uk/first-world-war-literacy-resources). Vote only once by clicking on the circle next to your choice, entering your details and pressing **SUBMIT**. Votes must be submitted before 4 p.m. on Thursday 16th June.





Thanks to the lovely children of Orchard Junior School, Hampshire, for helping to write this chapter. They are: Gracie, Archie, Newlyn, Daniel, Faith, Ruby, Meegan, Wyatt, Oliver G, Bethany, Lewis, Blake, Lydia, Sol, Alina, Jacob, Ruth, Emily, Connor, Riley, Nathan, Kian, Bailey, Mitchell and Oliver D.



# Over the Line 2016

## Chapter 5



Grace's dream for the last few days had been to bump into Khal at school after Wales had beaten England with a Bale free kick. And to gently tease him. For a while.

At half time, yesterday, it looked like that dream was going to come true.

Then the second half happened. And the Khal thing happened. So now all Grace wanted was to see Khal looking well, Khal looking happy, Khal looking normal. She even hoped that Vardy and Sturridge's goals and England winning 2-1 would have helped him. Even if it meant he would now be teasing her.

Grace sighed, resigned to getting some grief from Khal.

Grace was in the library at break. She had been listening to Mrs Carnegie, who was talking about Northern Ireland.

'And did you know,' the librarian said, 'that young lad who scored for Northern Ireland... Gareth McAuley... well, his mother is a school librarian. Did you know that?'

Grace grinned. 'No wonder he's such a good player, Mrs C.'

The librarian laughed, then left, just as Khal came in with two of his mates.

She listened in on their conversation.

'Hey Khal. Did you watch the England match?' a boy called Ethan asked him.

'Yeah,' Khal replied. 'What a game. And that Sturridge goal at the end...'

Grace listened carefully to Khal's voice. He sounded okay. Not shaky. Not like the day before when he'd started shouting and screaming in history.

She carried on listening. Khal joining in the football banter. Back to normal. No mention of the day before from him or his mates. Not a word.

Grace could never understand boys. How could they not mention something as dramatic as one of them behaving like that in class and just talk about football instead?

Unfathomable.





As she waited – watching and listening from behind her box of books in the library back room – Grace saw Mr Clarke come into the library. He put his hand on Khal’s shoulder as he passed in the doorway, then walked to the back of the library, towards the photocopier, to wait for him.

Grace saw Khal quickly excuse himself and walk over to the history teacher. She guessed they had arranged to meet. And she knew that Mr Clarke wouldn’t want to talk to Khal about football: he’d want to talk about how Khal was feeling today and whether he was still planning to go on the Battlefield Tour in a week’s time. She knew that must be in doubt.

Grace sat down quietly, so neither of them could see her. She had no option but to listen.

‘Khalid. How are you today?’

‘Okay Sir.’

‘You sure?’

‘Yes Sir.’

‘Well, I spoke to your dad yesterday. You know, after you were in my lesson. About the trip. We were wondering if you should...’

‘I want to go on the Battlefield Tour, Sir.’

‘You do?’

‘I do, sir. I need to go.’

‘But I’m not sure your parents agree, Khalid. And I have my doubts. You were not in a good way yesterday. It was quite a shock to us all.’

‘That’s over sir. I’m better now.’ Khal sounded excited. ‘My parents asked me this morning if I thought I should still go. I said I do. And they said that they were worried about what happened yesterday. And I agreed they should be, that I understood why they were worried.’

‘So?’







‘So I suggested to them that if that kind of thing happened again I’ll stay at home and not go to France, but that if it doesn’t happen again, I’ll go.’

‘And?’

‘And they agreed,’ Khal said.

Grace listened to Mr Clarke’s silence. A few seconds before he spoke.

‘Okay, Khalid,’ the history teacher said, finally. ‘I agree too. But please talk to me if you need to. About anything.’

‘I do need to talk to you, Sir,’ Khal enthused. ‘Because I want to know more about the footballers’ battalion. I want to know it all. I’ve read some stuff. Like about Jack Woodward being England’s leading scorer in 1915, but that he gave it up to go to war and his job was to clear unexploded bombs in the trenches. I mean, that’s like Wayne Rooney doing it now. And about Sid Wheelhouse, the Grimsby player, who was killed in a gas attack. I want to know about them all.’

Grace heard Mr Clarke laugh. ‘You *have* been doing your homework. Well done, Khalid. Did you even have time to watch the football last night, with all that reading?’

And then they were talking about the match. Just like that. About England’s goals. Bale’s amazing free kick. How they thought Wales would qualify anyway. Grace held her head in her hands. Even Mr Clarke was talking about Euro 2016 now.

After Mr Clarke had gone, Khal came to the door of the library back office.

Grace prepared herself for some sort of wind-up about the football.

‘We need to talk,’ Khal said.

‘Do we?’ Grace could hear her that voice sounded guarded, even aggressive.

‘Oh not about that,’ Khal grinned. ‘We’ll both qualify now. You’ll batter the Russians. I hope you do.’

‘Hmmm.’

‘No, we need to talk about the thing.’

‘Thing?’ Grace asked.





‘The thing I was scared of,’ Khal’s eyes lit up. ‘Because I know it’s not something to be scared of now. It’s a mystery we have to solve. And it’s to do with the trip. And I need your help.’

‘How do you know that?’

‘Because of what I saw, Grace! I saw an old-fashioned footballer suddenly blown up and turn into a First World War soldier. I saw it. Sort of. And I wasn’t hurt. It was a sign for us to do something. Not to be scared of something.’

Grace grinned. ‘Go on,’ she said.

‘Whatever has been happening – if it’s in my head or even a ghost – started when we went up to the archive in the attic, didn’t it?’

‘Yeah?’

‘So that’s what we need to do again. We need to find more of those documents. See what else is up there. I think there might be something that will help us solve the mystery.’

‘Okay.’

‘So can we go up?’

Grace shook her head. ‘I need to ask Mrs C. And she’s gone for today now. I’ll ask her on Monday. We can go up then. I think she’ll let us look at anything we want if we ask.’

Grace watched Khal squint, thinking.

‘Not today?’ he pressed.

‘No. Look. She knew we went up last time and she asked me not to again without her permission. She trusts me. And I’m not betraying that.’

‘Okay,’ Khal agreed, looking disappointed. ‘So we wait until Monday?’

‘Yes,’ Grace said. ‘But that’s exciting. Imagine what we might find up there. All that stuff you’ve been seeing. You might find out who it involves. Or something.’

Khal nodded. It was okay. He could wait. It would give him more time to search online about all the players who signed up for the Footballers’ Battalion.

Even if he did have to wait for three days to find out, he’d find out. It was something worth waiting for.





**Thank you for voting yesterday. It was a big help. Just for your information, over 500 classes cast votes, with 83.5% of you going for Khal being allowed to leave for France. Thank you for your enthusiasm whichever way you voted. We had votes from all over the UK, from Eire, Bratislava and Singapore. Thank you!**



# Over the Line 2016

## Chapter 6



Khal was seriously fired up when he arrived at school on Monday morning. He wanted to get into the school archive. ASAP.

He'd spent most of the weekend watching live sport. Seen New Zealand beat Wales at rugby, then England beat Australia, then eight games at the Euros, finished off with a bit of F1 and a touch of tennis.

The rest of the time he'd been reading about the Footballers' Battalion. Hundreds of men joining two battalions of soldiers, fighting together in the First World War. England players. Wales players. Northern Ireland players. He still found it hard to believe that England's leading scorer had stopped playing football in 1915 and had taken on a role clearing unexploded bombs in the trenches of the Somme. He had wondered if the footballers of today would volunteer if a World War broke out.

Quite a weekend on and off the pitch.

But, all the time he was watching sport and doing his research, he'd been thinking about this morning. About how he and Grace were going to go up into the archive to search for the object or document they were convinced was there. The clue that might help them solve the mystery of the strange visions he'd had last week.

At morning break, Khal made immediately for the library. On entering, he saw Grace behind the library counter with another girl.

'Where's Mrs Carnegie?' Khal asked her, impatient. 'Have you talked to her about that thing?' Khal didn't want to say exactly what he was talking about, aware the other girl could hear him.

'She's away,' Grace said, coming from behind the counter to walk with Khal towards the doorway to the school archive.

'Away?'

'I'm sorry, Khal,' Grace explained. 'She had a weekend with the TA and they aren't arriving back until tonight. She's off all day.'

'TA?' Khal asked. 'What's that?'

'The Territorial Army. She's in the reserves. Not like full time soldiers. But they do some of the same things. Same training. Stuff like that.'

Khal nodded. He was surprised. He hadn't imagined that the school librarian was also a reserve soldier. But why not?

'Good for her,' Khal grinned. 'So, when can we go in? Now or at lunch?' He was already





staring at the archive door.

‘Neither,’ Grace said.

‘Neither?’

‘We have to wait until tomorrow. And only if Mrs C lets us. I told you. She trusts me. Anyway, I have to help on the desk.’

Khal watched Grace go back to the library counter. It was raining outside, so the library was even busier than usual. The two girls had a queue. A long one. So Khal was left on his own by the door to the library archive. Wondering. Could he? Should he? Would he?

Why not?

Why not just slip through the door, up the stone steps and see what he could find? Why wait for tomorrow? Mrs C wasn’t here. Grace was busy. Khal could find what he needed to find. Who’d lose out?

Khal reached for the door handle. It was cold in his palm.

Then he stopped.

No.

This was wrong.

Grace had said they shouldn’t. If Khal went up there she’d be disappointed. And she might get into trouble with Mrs C.

Khal took his hand away and moved from the door.

He would wait. Until tomorrow. Like she’d said.

What was the problem with waiting one more day?

And, anyway, break was nearly over. He had to get to the other side of the school.

Quickly.

Khal left the library, moving through the school at pace. Past the history classroom where he’d had a bad day last week, on to geography. That was his next lesson.

As he walked he reflected that he’d not seen or experienced anything strange since that day in history. What did that mean? Was that good? Or bad? He couldn’t tell.

But he was kind of pleased. Although he knew that, if he and Grace were going to solve the mystery, he might have to face a few more weird events again.

‘Khalid?’

A man’s voice.

Khal turned swiftly.







'I've been looking for you.'

It was Mr Clarke.

'Sir?'

'First of all, how are you feeling this week?'

'Better, Sir. Thanks for asking.'

'Good. So, coming to France?'

'Yes, Sir. One hundred percent.'

'Even better,' the teacher grinned mischievously. 'So how about joining me and a few others at one of the last sixteen games?'

Mr Clarke was holding out a fan of pieces of white and blue card.

'What?' Khal stopped, school-uniformed bodies moving either side of him.

'Next Monday night's match. In Nice. I've got ten tickets. And I know you are a big football fan, aren't you?'

Khal stared at his teacher. He couldn't speak.

Mr Clarke laughed. 'Is that a yes?'

'Yes, Sir,' Khal grinned. 'Is it? Er... which match is it?'

'Not sure, Khalid.'

'Hang on.' Khal knew he could work it out. 'Monday 27th, yeah? Night match. 8pm. In Nice. That's B2 versus F2.'

'Er,' Mr Clarke looked puzzled. 'Can you translate that for me?'

'Well, it could be one of four teams from group F playing England or Wales, or maybe Slovakia. But it depends on the results. If England win tonight, then England finish top (that's B1), but if England draw tonight and Wales win, then England are second. That makes us B2, you see.'

'Even better,' Mr Clarke said. 'So we might get to see England? And, if not, maybe Wales? Anyway Khalid, I've got a class. I'll talk to you later.'

Khal nodded and joined the surge of children walking towards the geography classrooms. His head was buzzing, his mind off the library archive and what secrets it might or might not hide.

*Was that for real?* he asked himself.

Then he stopped.

He had just realised that he had a huge dilemma.





If England won tonight they'd finish top and they'd be playing their last sixteen game on Saturday in Paris. If England drew and Wales won, then he'd get to see England play live. In Nice.

As Khal found his desk in geography, his mind was working out the ifs and buts of Group B. Did he want England to win tonight so they were B1? Or did he want them to draw and for Wales to win, so that England would be B2?

Could he really sit and watch his team and hope they didn't win?

If you'd like to read a story about a footballer from today having to decide whether or not to volunteer to fight in war, check out Tom Palmer's *Call of Duty*, a short story, available for free on [www.readingwar.co.uk](http://www.readingwar.co.uk):

[https://issuu.com/barringtonstoke/docs/call\\_of\\_duty/1?e=2213880/7442461](https://issuu.com/barringtonstoke/docs/call_of_duty/1?e=2213880/7442461)



# Over the Line 2016

## Chapter 7



‘How was Wales?’ Grace asked, as Mrs C breezed into the library, a canvas bag over her shoulder.

‘Tough,’ the librarian grimaced. ‘Very tough. But glorious. Loved every minute.’

Mrs Carnegie was back from her long weekend training with the Army Reserves. Grace could see that she was buzzing. She seemed to be overflowing with energy, not tired at all. Her eyes were shining.

‘So what did you do?’

‘Night patrols. Live fire training exercises. That sort of thing. Sleepless. Dangerous. Lots of fun.’

‘Fun?’ Grace asked, amused that Mrs C was talking in short clipped sentences like she was still on a military mission.

‘Enormous fun,’ Mrs Carnegie said. ‘Anyway Grace. Got your message. What’s this favour you need?’

Grace swallowed. This was it. Time to ask.

She paused, breathed in. ‘Khalid and I want to go up into the archive and search for more documents related to William Barker and the Footballers’ Battalion. And I’m sorry I didn’t ask last time when we went up. I regret it. But we’re really interested in this. Can we go up again? Please?’

‘Sure. Go ahead. I trust you, Grace.’

Grace beamed. ‘Thank you!’

The librarian shook her head. ‘No problem. There’s a lot of stuff up there that hasn’t been catalogued yet. I’m interested too. And – when we’re in France next week...’

‘You’re coming as well?’ Grace interrupted.

‘Certainly am. Mr Clarke wants me to along to explain what the army does today compared to a hundred years ago. And anyway: Battlefield Tour? Me? No question. Love it.’

‘Love it?’ Grace didn’t understand. ‘But isn’t it sad? All those graves? All those men who died.’

Mrs C lowered her voice. ‘It’s sad, yes. You’re right. Very right. But it’s uplifting too, Grace. The monuments. The fields of graves. The perfectly kept cemeteries. To think of all those young men who went over there and are buried there still. They died for their country. For us. For us to live like we live now. I think you have to go there to really understand it.





Anyway, lunchtime. You can go up in the archive then. Okay?’

‘Thanks Mrs C.’

Grace texted Khal. She was excited now. ‘Lunch time. Archive. All clear,’ she texted.

Then she laughed. She was starting to sound like Mrs C.

Grace could see that Khal was nervous when he arrived at the library at lunchtime. He kept looking in the direction of the door to the archive, then at the floor.

She had to calm him down. Help him. But how?

Then Grace remembered how Khal had been with his mates on Friday. So she decided to play it that way. Talk about football.

Football, football, football.

‘Hey Khal. Looking forward to watching England in the next round?’

Khal’s frown changed briefly into a grin, then went back to a frown.

‘Well done to you,’ Khal added. ‘Wales won the group. That’s a massive achievement.’

‘Thanks.’ Now it was Grace’s turn to grin.

‘Are you pleased England came second?’ she asked.

‘I am. Sort of. We get to go and watch them play whoever it’s going to be in Nice. It’ll be amazing. But it was frustrating, wasn’t it?’

Grace shrugged. ‘Not for me. I was watching Wales stuff Russia.’

Khal held his hand up. ‘Northern Ireland tonight. Wouldn’t you love to see them beat Germany?’

‘Oh yeah,’ Grace said, noticing that Khal was eyeing the attic door again.

‘I’m scared,’ Khal said suddenly. ‘The last time I saw him he was blown up on the pitch. And I didn’t react very well.’

‘I understand,’ Grace said, swiftly catching up with Khal’s change of subject. ‘That must have been horrible. Maybe we should give it a miss.’

‘No.’ Khal said loudly. ‘I *want* to do it. I *need* to do it. I want you to make me go up there, not *stop* me.’

Grace nodded. She tried to think. This was a bit... intense. But she understood what he was saying. That, if she could help him be brave enough to go up there, they might find what they were after. Answers to why Khal had been seeing these things, even ghosts, if that’s





what they were.

‘Khal?’

‘What?’

They were face to face now.

Eye to eye.

‘You told me that you think that these ghosts – or whatever they are – are signs to you. Not threats. You said that this is not about you being in danger, but that it is about finding clues to solve a mystery. And I think you’re right.’

During Khal’s silence that followed, Grace heard a gentle knocking sound coming from the roof – or the attic. She ignored it. Didn’t waver. Kept her eyes on her friend.

‘I’m ready now,’ Khal said in a firm voice, standing.

Grace stood up too and followed her friend to the attic door without speaking. Saw him grip the handle, twist it, then pull the door open.

The air from inside smelled dry and dusty. And when she found the light switch to illuminate the archive above, all she could see was strange twisted shadows cast by the iron spiral staircase that went up to the attic.

Khal had stopped at the foot of the steps.

‘Do you think he’ll be there?’ Grace asked Khal, thinking it would be better to talk about what she knew would be going through Khal’s mind. Be open about it.

‘I don’t know,’ he replied. ‘We have to go up there to see if we can find anything to help solve all this. But I mean... what if he’s injured? What if I see him after when he was blown up?’

Grace opened her mouth to reply. But nothing came out. And she knew why. It was because she had no answer to his question. Nothing she could say that would comfort him.

Khal raised his eyebrows. ‘Come on then,’ he said. ‘I’ll go first.’





# Over the Line 2016

## Chapter 8



Khal went first. Up and round the spiral staircase, his heart hammering hard.

He lifted his head so that he could see what was in the archive room, feeling a little like a soldier in the trenches putting his head above the parapet.

Nothing to see.

No smell of burning.

Khal looked around the attic. There was no one up there. Living or dead. The box where he had seen the soldier sitting last time was empty.

‘It’s clear,’ he told Grace, who was below him on the spiral staircase.

They walked cautiously up the final few steps. The attic was dark and still. A single light bulb hung above them, swinging slightly, motes of dust swirling around it.

Silence.

Khal felt an expected creeping sense of disappointment overcoming him.

‘I sort of wanted...’ he said to Grace.

‘I know,’ she smiled. ‘Let’s search for papers. For anything we can find. We’ve got thirty minutes.’

‘Why are you so gloomy today, Khalid?’ Dad asked, as the Malik family sat at the kitchen table, sun streaming through the window, steam rising off the huge bowl of rice in front of them.

Meanwhile, the last Group F games were going on in the front room upstairs. Games that would determine who England played next. But that was not what Khal was thinking about.

Because Khal had been sat staring into space, thinking. Thinking that he and Grace had spent half an hour going through boxes and files and books in the school archive, but had come away with nothing. The only thing that seemed to relate to William Barker, the school’s former head teacher, was the slim file about German soldiers. But Khal wasn’t interested in that. Why should he want to know about German soldiers? They were the enemy, weren’t they? Khal wanted to find out about the Footballers’ Battalion. The British soldiers.

But he knew he had to reply to his dad. He quickly lifted himself out of his mood.

‘I’m not gloomy,’ Khal claimed.

‘He is, Mummy,’ his sister, Amani, chipped in. ‘He looks really mean.’





Khal sighed. Amani was doing his head in again. But he knew he could not react to her. He knew, also, that he had to pretend that everything else was okay. Otherwise he might not be allowed to go to France on Sunday.

Khal felt both his parents' eyes on him. And Amani's.

'I'm fine,' he said. 'Just tired. I've been working hard on my project and it's tiring. But exciting too. I can't wait to go to France.'

'Well, we are looking forward to hearing about France and your trip tomorrow at the parents' evening,' his mum said.

And Khal remembered. The big meeting tomorrow after school, for all the parents of children who were going on the Battlefield Tour. In the school library. Khal scratched his head. Was that something to worry about? His parents in the library? Near the school archive? Surely nothing could happen, could it?

And then, stopping Khal's thoughts suddenly, Amani was crying.

Immediately Khal's mum and dad's attention switched to his little sister.

'Oh... what's the matter honey?'

'Why are you crying?'

Khal studied his sister as his parents fussed. He could see that, as she was crying, she kept glancing at him. And that there was a look in her eyes. Her mischief look.

'I'm going to miss Khalid when he's in France,' Amani wailed. 'Mummy? Daddy? Can I sleep in Khalid's room with him until he goes away? Then I won't feel so sad when he is gone. Pleeese?'

Khal was about to say no. No way did he want his little sister in his room with him. But then he wondered if his parents would be cross with him, wondered if they'd not let him go to France if he made his sister cry even more by saying no.

Khal decided to stay quiet. For now.

'Ohhhh, sweetie,' Khal's mum beamed. 'How lovely? Will you miss your brother that much?'

'I will,' Amani whimpered. Then that look again. That smile hidden from her parents.

And Dad was smiling too. 'Khalid? What do you think? Can you share your room to make your little sister happy?'

'Hmmm,' Khal muttered.

'What?' Khal saw his dad had that look on his face when he wanted an answer. A yes kind of answer.

'Fine. Okay,' Khal said, trying desperately not to sound annoyed. 'That's fine.'





But it wasn't okay. Not at all.

'I want to watch the matches now,' he said. 'Can I? I need to know who England are playing on Monday. All the teams we could play are on now.'

'As long as Amani can sleep in your room?' Dad pressed.

'Yes, fine. It'll be fun, won't it Amani?' Khal asked his sister. 'But can I go now?'

Khal studied both his parents. They looked relaxed.

'Yes. Go on. That's fine.'

'Thanks.'

Khal rushed up the stone steps to the front room. Thinking about who England would be playing next. Iceland? Portugal? Austria? Hungary? One of those. And, whoever it was, he'd be watching them in France in the stadium next week.

That was exciting. Very exciting.

And it would take his mind off the growing worry about the parents' evening tomorrow night. In the library. All he had to do was get through that without any hiccups and he'd be on his way to France.

But Khal did not know that the meeting at the library was not going to be the problem tomorrow: it was what would come after the meeting that would fill him with a horror worse than any horror he had felt before.

**We'd like to know who you think England will be playing in Nice on Monday night. This is the Group F table as it stands on Wednesday morning:**

<b>Hungary</b>	<b>4 points</b>	<b>+2 goal difference</b>
<b>Iceland</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>0</b>
<b>Portugal</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>0</b>
<b>Austria</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>-2</b>

**These are the matches that are on tonight:**

**Hungary v Portugal**

**Iceland v Austria**

**Who do you think will finish SECOND in the group to play England in Nice?**

**You can vote by visiting the Literacy Trust Twitter page (@literacy\_trust) from 9am to 5pm on Wednesday. Vote for one team and see if all the other schools agree with you.**



# Over the Line 2016

## Chapter 9



### **A message to teachers.**

*First of all, thank you for reading this story with your students. It's much appreciated. We are into the second half of the story now. There will be 16 episodes in all.*

*I wanted to warn you that at the end of this chapter there is an unpleasant war-related scene. You might want to check it before reading to younger children. I have italicised the troubling section. You can stop with the sentence 'A soldier' with younger children and the meaning of the story won't be affected.*

*Thank you – Tom*

'Good evening. And welcome to the school library.'

Mr Clarke was standing with Mrs Carnegie at the front of a group of seated mums and dads, his hand on the library counter.

'I'm delighted to see so many parents here. Thank you for coming. Tonight's meeting is to tell you about what your children will be doing next week on the school's annual Battlefield Tour. The coach leaves early on Monday. Six a.m. To the airport. Then we fly to France.'

Khal was sitting with his mum, dad and sister, with Grace and her parents directly behind them. Khal had been wondering if he could look at his phone to see what the scores had been in Group F. It was 6.45 p.m. now. The games would nearly be over and England's next opponents might be known. Last time he looked it was Portugal who England would be playing. But there were a couple of minutes left in each game.

But, as soon as Mr Clarke began to describe the trip, the hairs on Khal's arms raised. He felt a shot of adrenalin rushing through him. For the minute, he needed to concentrate on Mr Clarke not the football.

'The itinerary for next week is simple,' his history teacher went on. 'On Monday we will go to watch England against Iceland in Nice.'

Khal frowned.

How did Mr Clarke know England were playing Iceland? Was it a guess?





Khal thought about checking his phone, but decided against it. His mum would only tell him off, saying he was being disrespectful.

‘Then over the next three days we will visit the Footballers’ Battalion memorial and the Delville Wood battlefield. To Couin, also, to the grave of Sid Wheelhouse, a footballer who died at the Battle of the Somme. We will be staying at the former Girls’ School in Bethune, where the Footballers’ Battalion were billeted in 1916, exactly one hundred years ago. Then – on Friday – we are very fortunate to be attending the main centenary ceremony at the Thiepval Memorial, where many heads of state will also be present.’

A murmuring passed through the audience of parents and children. Khal leaned backwards in his seat just as Grace looked up at him.

‘I can’t believe we’re going to do this,’ he whispered.

‘I know,’ she said.

As Mr Clarke’s talk went on, Khal felt a nudge in his ribs. Amani.

‘Is that her?’ she said loudly, pointing at Grace behind them.

Khal rolled his eyes, then turned to his sister.

‘Do you *want* to sleep in my room tonight?’

‘Yes.’

‘Then shut up.’

Amani smirked and put a finger on her lips.

‘Visiting the graves of the soldiers is a very important part of the tour. We’d like families to talk about what it means and what it might be like before the trip. That will help when we arrive there.’

Thinking about visiting war graves, Khal’s anger at his sister evaporated. How would that feel? he wondered. It was hard to imagine 10,000s of graves in France. Hard to imagine the scale of it.

‘We will take time to visit not just the graves of British soldiers, but Germans too,’ Mr Clarke went on. ‘As the year sevens are studying German language we feel this will be beneficial to the children.’

Khal wrinkled his nose. Why German graves? He didn’t get that. It was okay learning the language. He quite liked it, but he didn’t understand why they had to visit the German graves too. Hadn’t they been the enemy?







Then something changed. A sharp stinging in his nose. Khal glanced quickly around the room. At the archive door behind them. Saw Grace's face behind him looking concerned. And his mum eyeing him.

Khal was seized by panic. He could feel sweat beading on his back. His pulse up. His breathing shallow.

'What's up?' Grace asked.

'I can smell it,' Khal whispered. 'Can you?'

'What? No.'

'The sharp burning smell,' Khal said, seeing Amani looking at him, listening.

Khal narrowed his eyes at his sister, then looked straight ahead at Mr Clarke as he spoke.

*Act normal*, he told himself. *Don't react*.

He so wanted to go to France, but he knew that if he reacted to how the burning smell was making him feel, he could lose it all.

He fished his phone out. Needed to distract himself. Straight to the BBC sport app. The final scores. Hungary 3 Portugal 3. Iceland 2 Austria 1. So *Iceland* had come second in the group. Mr Clarke had been right.

On the way home, Dad took Khal aside, his sister and his mum walking on ahead through the trees on the moor outside school.

'It was good to hear about your trip and see you looking so happy about it.'

'I am,' Khal said, still troubled by what he'd sensed in the library. He knew what it meant. The soldier he'd seen was near. But where? Was he among the trees now? Would he appear on the ground suddenly?

'And we shouldn't have to worry about anything now,' his dad added.

'No. I'm fine, Dad,' Khal lied.

'Good. Well, so long as the rest of this week goes smoothly, we're delighted you are going on this Battlefield Tour.'

Bedtime.





Khal was reading his *World Soccer* and *FourFourTwo* magazines. About Iceland. Finding out everything he could about them to decide if England could beat them and so he could be fully informed for a match he was going to attend. He was so excited about that. To be there!

His new roommate – Amani – had insisted on talking. About the goldfish at her school mostly. Their names. Their markings. What they did. Khal had asked her a few questions, more interested in why she was so into the goldfish than the fish themselves. But now Amani was asleep.

Khal saw the curtain in his window waft slightly. He put his magazines down and checked the clock.

10:55.

Late.

He reached up to flick off the light switch on the wall. Then he saw that there was someone on the bedroom floor between him and his sister.

A soldier.

*Writhing in pain.*

*Mouth wide open. Teeth exposed. Crying out, but making no sound.*

*Khal couldn't breathe as he looked at the man.*

*There was a wound the size and shape of a rugby ball in his side. Khal could see dark shapes spilling out of the wound and what might be bones. There was blood pouring onto the carpet. And then Khal saw that the man was staring at him. Those eyes again. The soldier from the archive, the football pitch, his nightmares.*

*Khal wanted to cry out. At first the choking smell of burning stopped him breathing in to shout out his horror. But when he found some breath he stopped himself from shouting.*

*Because, if he did that now, he'd lose everything. The Battlefield Tour. The England v Iceland match. Even if he moved or left the room or cried his sister would wake up.*

*Then what?*

*Khal closed his eyes and counted to ten. This was a sign, not a threat, he said to himself. Over and over. He had to believe that.*

*When he opened his eyes again it would be gone. He hoped.*

*Khal opened his eyes.*

*The soldier was still there. But he wasn't crying out any more. His face had gone pale and his eyes were dull and his mouth was moving, but not enough to form words.*





*He was dying.*

*In front of Khal.*

*And all Khal could do was lie there on his side and watch.*

**Thanks for your ideas about who would be the team that England would play in the last 16. Your combined votes were: Iceland 39%, Portugal 35%, Hungary 17%, Austria 9%. As you'll know by now England will be playing Iceland. So well done 39% of you. And many thanks to the rest of you.**



# Over the Line 2016

## Chapter 10



Khal tried to close his eyes. Tried to sleep. But how could he sleep with the vision of a soldier dying on his bedroom floor, the carpet turned into what looked like the bottom of a First World War trench? Sleep wasn't going to happen.

The only way Khal managed to stay sane – and not scream the house down – was to tell himself over and over that it was an *image* of a soldier. Not a soldier.

*A sign, not a threat. A sign, not a threat. A sign, not a threat.*

Khal's mantra kept him going.

That and looking at his sister, who was sleeping with what looked like a broad smile on her face opposite him. Khal had to admit that Amani looked sweet. Young. Innocent. Sweet. A little girl without a worry in the world.

During the night the soldier stopped moving, stopped staring at Khal and then – as dawn broke – started fading.

By six in the morning he was gone.

Khal climbed out of bed quietly, walked across the hall, then into the bathroom where he peered at his face in the mirror.

He looked tired. Defeated.

Staring at the puffy skin under his eyes, Khal remembered the terrible things he had seen in the night. Immediately, he threw up. That horrible, choking, bile-smelling ordeal of being sick. And trying to do it without waking anyone else.

Wiping his mouth and washing the vomit down the sink, Khal looked at his face again in the mirror. He stared deep into his own eyes, looking for something. He wasn't sure what he was looking for until he saw it there in the changing expression on his face.

Determination.

To face what he was meant to do.

Whatever that was.

Grace saw Khal coming into the library. And that he appeared to be laughing. Certainly grinning. He bounced up to her and Mrs Carnegie at the counter.





‘Have I got something to tell you?’ Khal said too loudly.

‘Have you?’ Grace kept her voice calm, hoping Khal would do the same.

‘Yes,’ Khal grinned, then walked over to the newspaper table and rack.

‘Go on,’ Mrs Carnegie said, a worried look on her face. ‘Talk to him.’

‘Thanks Mrs C. He’s just a bit excited about France, I think.’

The librarian raised an eyebrow. Then Grace followed Khal. *Now what?* she asked herself as she approached her unusual friend. *He looks like he’s losing it again.*

‘Tell me,’ Grace demanded.

And then Khal was off. Jabbering away, telling her the most appalling story she had ever heard. A soldier dying on his bedroom floor. Seeing guts and bones and the life draining from the soldier’s face. And it was all the more appalling because Khal seemed to be happy about what he’d seen.

When he finished Grace was so disturbed that she snapped.

‘Have you heard yourself?’ she said. ‘You actually sound happy. Or drunk. Or something. If any teacher saw you they’d think you’d lost it again and would send you home.’

‘I’m like this because I didn’t sleep at all,’ Khal giggled. ‘So tired everything is funny.’

‘Mrs Carnegie knows about what happened to you in History last week,’ Grace continued. ‘She’ll tell Mr Clarke if you do anything weird. And, to be honest, I find it really upsetting that you are telling me all this grinning.’

Grace stopped talking. There was a moment’s pause. Then she saw Khal’s grin collapse. And that he was suddenly covering his face with his hands, sobbing.

Grace put her hand on Khal’s shoulder, but said nothing. His mood swings were dizzying.

After a minute or two, Khal looked at her. His eyes were red.

‘It was horrible,’ he said. His voice was different now. Like all the energy had been sapped out of him.

‘It sounds it,’ Grace said.

‘I want to help him. The soldier.’

‘I do too.’

‘But how?’ Khal asked.

‘By calming down first of all.’

Khal breathed in and out like his dad had taught him. It worked.

‘Look, I’m worried that something is going to happen in France,’ Grace said. ‘And it could be worse than what happened to you last night.’







Khal nodded. But didn't speak.

'Can you handle that?' Grace pressed.

Khal nodded again. Silent, but he could feel his determination coming back. 'I just needed to tell you about it,' he explained. 'Now I've told you I feel better.'

'We can sort it. Together. In France.'

'We can,' Khal nodded.

Grace could see her friend still needed more of a pep talk.

'Next week it is exactly one hundred years since the beginning of the Battle of the Somme. We're going to France to learn about it,' she said. 'And about the Footballers' Battalion. To learn about the men. What they did. Who lived. Who died. And...'

'To find out which one of them it is,' Khal interrupted.

'I suppose so,' Grace said. 'So in France we need to take everything in. Look at everything we are shown. Listen to everything we are told. Talk to Mr Clarke and Mrs Carnegie. Ask them questions. Read plaques and interpretation boards. Find leaflets with information on them. There'll be something somewhere.'

'Yes.'

'That's all we can do, Khal,' Grace said, feeling like she was getting through to him.

'Concentrate on that and we'll be back in England in a week's time with everything sorted. Yeah?'

'Yeah.'

'And,' Grace added. 'We get to see England play Iceland in Euro 2016. Live. How about that?'

'I can't wait,' Khal said. 'Thanks Grace.'

'Text me if anything happens over the weekend,' Grace concluded. 'If I don't see you before, I'll see you at six in the school car park on Monday morning. We're going to have one amazing time on the Battlefields Tour.'

**Thanks for reading the story this week. Next week is the last full week of *Over the Line 2016*, where we will join Grace and Khal in France and get to the bottom of Khal's troubles. Have a lovely weekend everyone. And good luck to your teams if they are playing in the weekend Euro matches.**

**Tom**



# Over the Line 2016

## Chapter 11



Grace arrived at the school car park at 5.45am. On foot. She was first there.

She was surprised how bright the sky was so early in the day. And how warm the air.

As she waited, noticing a couple of cars pulling up, familiar faces behind windscreens, she could feel her excitement building. Her skin tingling. Her grin broadening. Because this was it. The Battlefield Tour school trip that she'd been looking forward to for months.

The weekend's events had distracted her from the trip. Her grandparents had come to stay – from Swansea – and she'd watched the New Zealand v Wales rugby test, then the Wales v Northern Ireland football match. Both with her granddad. One was a tough watch, the other glorious. She couldn't believe that Wales were in the Euro 2016 quarter finals against Belgium. That made Wales one of the eight best teams in Europe. But she was sorry that Northern Ireland were out. She liked them.

Grace sat next to Khal on the coach to the airport. Khal was wearing an England football top. They talked about Wales v Northern Ireland, then England v Iceland. But they didn't talk about the soldier or Khal's visions. Not in front of the others. They'd agreed to keep that to themselves. Leave talking about it until after the England match.

Mrs Carnegie spoke to them all before they set off. 'Okay kids. You know this is a school trip. You know you are representing the school. You've heard that before. But – importantly this week – you are representing the United Kingdom. Some people in Europe may be wondering about our country at the moment. Your duty is to represent the UK by showing absolute respect to everyone we meet and every place we visit. Okay?'

'Okay Miss,' the children said as one.

'Good. Now let's lighten up. I've... er... put together a playlist.' Mrs Carnegie held up her phone.

There were a couple of groans. Some laughter. But Grace was impressed with the first track, at least.

No by Meghan Trainor.

'So who are you supporting tonight?' Khal asked.

Grace knew he was excited. He was going to watch his country play in a major football tournament. In just a few hours.

Grace shrugged and gave Khal a little smile.

'I see,' Khal said and dropped the subject.





They didn't sit together on the flight. They'd been given seats at opposite sides of the plane. Grace was forced to sit with two boys called Hamid and Jake. She'd seen them with Khal before, but she'd never talked to them. And they were ignoring her anyway. Going on about football.

'Did you see the Germans thrash Slovakia last night?' Hamid asked.

'Yeah. They were good. But they do my head in a bit.'

'The Germans?'

'Yeah,' Jake said.

'Why?' Hamid asked.

'I dunno. My dad was making jokes all night about the war and speaking with a funny German accent.'

'Oh right.'

'He was kind of cross too. About the school meeting last week. He said that he didn't want me shedding any tears over German graves. You know...'

'Well, they were the enemy,' Hamid said weakly.

Grace tuned out. Their conversation was making her feel uncomfortable, especially after what Mrs C had said before they left. She wondered how she'd feel when *she* saw a German grave. Not like that. It would still be a young man who'd probably not wanted to end up buried in a French field.

And then they were in Nice. The weather was beautiful under a deep blue sky scattered with touches of high fluffy cloud.

Off the plane.

Through the airport.

Onto another coach.

The soundtrack playing again. Most of Year 7 singing along to Sia's *Chandelier*.

Khal found Grace and sat next to her. He had a bag of crisps. They were called *Lay's*. Grace turned round and saw that everyone was eating them. They'd bought them at the airport.

Grace ate a few crisps as she and Khal looked out through the window at Nice. It looked so different to the UK. And not just because they were driving on the wrong side of the





road. There were palm trees and some of the buildings were painted orange and red and yellow. They looked beautiful against the sunny sky. And the shops all looked really interesting. Not like the ones at home. But she knew the crisps weren't anything new.

'So you like these crisps?' Grace asked Khal.

'They're amazing. I've never tasted anything like them before.'

'You know they're exactly the same as Walkers Crisps in the UK?' Grace laughed.

'No, they're not,' Khal said through a mouthful of the crisps.

Grace shrugged. They were. She knew it. But, if Khal wanted to think they were exotic, then he could.

Eventually the coach stopped. Outside the Allianz Riviera stadium.

Mr Clarke was standing at the front of the coach, a hand on a seat either side of him.

'Please stop eating crisps for a minute so that I can talk to you,' he said in a strong voice that was one tone down from a shout.

The noises of rustling and munching stopped.

'We have arrived at the Allianz Riviera stadium,' the history teacher said. 'In less than an hour we will be sitting inside watching England play Iceland for a place in the quarter finals of Euro 2016. You must do *exactly* what I or Mrs Carnegie say whenever we say it. Any deviation from that rule then everyone will miss the game. Understood?'

A loud call of 'Understood' filled the bus.

Grace looked at the stadium. It was pretty impressive. A white honeycomb of pipes, covered in glass, that looked blue under the French sky. And it wasn't straight and boxy like the stadiums she had seen in the UK. It was curved and elegant.

'Good,' Mr Clarke was still talking. 'We want you to enjoy this. We want you to remember the day for the rest of your lives. And we also want England to win!'

A big cheer went up.

Grace sat back and watched everyone. It wasn't that she hated England. How could she? She was half English herself. She *loved* England. But she wasn't that bothered about its football team. When it came to sport, she was Welsh. She always liked to see the underdogs win, anyway. And today the underdogs were Iceland.

Grace followed Khal off the coach and they headed towards the turnstiles of the stadium.





**My original plan for this chapter was for the Battlefield Tour to start with the ferry journey from Dover to Calais, to follow in the footsteps of the Football Battalion who travelled to France by boat. But when Mr Clarke secured tickets for the England v Iceland game, that wasn't going to work. However, this is a short video I made while crossing the channel on my own Battlefield Tour (filmed by the National Literacy Trust's Jim Sells). It explains how the men travelled and explores how they might have felt.**

**<https://vimeo.com/90870337>**

You can find free downloadable posters relating to the Battlefield Tour storyline on this webpage: <http://tompalmer.co.uk/first-world-war-literacy-resources>

**Many thanks to St Wilfrid's Primary in Longridge, Lancashire, who helped me with the story by telling me about their own school Battlefield Tour.**





# Over the Line 2016

## Chapter 12



Khal closed his eyes as the train accelerated out of Nice Ville Station. He felt bad. Really bad.

Had that actually just happened?

Did he really just watch England play so appallingly?

Had England gone 1-0 up, then conceded two in the following few minutes?

Then had they not managed to string three passes together for the next 70 minutes?

Yes.

Yes, it had all happened.

Khal didn't want to take the victory away from Iceland. They'd been great. Their fans had been even better. He liked them. He wished them well.

But England?

He had known that – regardless of the result – heading north would be a difficult moment. The match was finished and the Battlefield Tour was beginning. They were now travelling on a high speed French TGV train to Paris. Then on to the Somme. Whatever strange things had been happening to Khal back home, if they were going to happen again, they would happen soon.

At least the deep gloom he felt after the match was anaesthetising him against any worries or fears he had about what those things might be.

Khal swallowed and opened his eyes to see his reflection staring back at him from the darkened glass. This was going to be hard. He needed to be brave.

'Right Year Sevens,' Mr Clarke said. 'It's midnight now. We arrive in Paris at five-forty. Then we're onto another bus to the Somme. This is your chance to sleep. If you can. At least you can't have nightmares that will be worse than what we've just witnessed. We have a very long day ahead of us tomorrow.'

The train carriage went quiet quickly. The journey, the football match and the late hour had subdued everyone.

Khal stared out into the night. In his mind he could hear the Iceland fans' deep chant echoing in his mind like he was still living the nightmare he had just witnessed in the stadium. He frowned, closed his eyes and tried to sleep.

The next morning brought a long coach journey from Paris to the Somme. Conversations were still going on about the match. About England's dire performance.





Grace had been very quiet, leaving Khal to himself.

They had left behind a Paris of breath-taking buildings and tight city streets after croissants and hot chocolate in a café outside the station. Next onto long fast motorways with huge brown signs advertising local tourist attractions every few kilometres. Then off the motorways and onto narrow lanes lined with tall narrow trees, the bus swinging as it negotiated the corners.

Khal was staring out of the left-hand side of the bus when the mood in the coach changed suddenly from quiet conversations to silence. All the laughing and chatter had stopped, every head turned to look to the right.

Khal lifted himself up off his seat to see what was going on.

He saw two small patches of white among the farmers' fields. Then another white patch much closer. So close he could see what it was.

Dozens. No, not dozens. Hundreds of small white gravestones in perfect rows against closely-cropped lush green lawns.

The war graves.

'There's so many of them,' Khal said.

No-one replied.

The mood was still silent when they arrived at their first stop, the coach creaking, then hissing as its hydraulics relaxed.

Everyone restless. Shifting about. Stretching.

'Come off the bus,' Mr Clarke said from his regular position at the front of the coach. 'Then gather round the memorial you can see over there. Keep off the road.'

Khal registered a strange atmosphere as they filed off the bus. No talking. No laughing. No pushing. Single file. Thirty children clustering around a two-metre high brown marble stone, topped with a large football.

'This, Year Seven, is Longueval,' Mrs Carnegie was speaking. 'We are very close to Delville Wood where the Footballers' Battalion fought and many of them fell.'

The librarian paused.

Khal noticed Grace was studying the words on the monument. He read them too.

TO THE MEMORY OF THE OFFICERS &  
MEN OF THE 17<sup>TH</sup> AND 23<sup>RD</sup> BATTALIONS





OF THE MIDDLESEX REGIMENT WHO  
SERVED THEIR GAME AND COUNTRY  
DURING THE GREAT WAR.

‘As you know our schools’ former head teacher – William Barker – fought alongside the men of that battalion,’ Mrs Carnegie said. ‘Many of the men he knew and cared for died in that wood right over there.’

Mrs Carnegie pointed at the woods in the distance. She said nothing as she then held up a picture of how it had looked in the war: leafless stumps of trees and mud. Desolate. Khal was getting the mood of this Battlefield Tour. Lots of facts, but lots of silences too.

Khal followed her line of sight and stared into the trees that rose with the land. That was when he saw him. A standing figure in a dark uniform. At the edge of the trees.

Khal stepped away from the other children and stared hard, trying to focus.

*Was it?*

Then Grace was next to him. ‘What is it?’ she asked.

‘It’s him,’ Khal said, taking his eyes off the woods to look at Grace. ‘Can you see him?’

Khal watched Grace peer into the trees.

She shook her head. ‘No.’

When Khal looked back at Delville Wood the soldier was gone.

‘He was there,’ Khal said.

‘I believe you,’ Grace replied.

‘Do you think he’s waiting for me?’ Khal asked.

‘Tomorrow we will return here to visit Delville Wood,’ Mrs Carnegie said, breaking her silence.

Grace put her hand on Khal’s shoulder. ‘I suppose you’ll find out tomorrow,’ she said.

**The children have just visited the Footballers’ Battalion Memorial in Longueval, Northern France. I visited it while researching the first Over the Line book in 2014. This is a short video I made while I was there: <http://tompalmer.co.uk/first-world-war-literacy-resources> (see the 7th video).**

**For teachers interested the BBC is running live coverage of the Somme Centenary commemorations on Friday 1 July. During school hours, all morning. Details of that**





coverage can be found here:

<http://www.bbc.co.uk/mediacentre/latestnews/2016/anniversary-battle-of-the-somme>.



# Over the Line 2016

## Chapter 13



Khal woke at five-thirty in the morning, a shaft of light from under a wooden shutter shining in his eyes.

It took him a few seconds to realise where he was. He could see 11 other beds lined up on both sides of the room, each with a boy in it. The walls were tiled. The floor too. He counted three large windows with wooden shutters.

Khal remembered now. He was in the old girls' school in Bethune. A large stone building just off the main square of a pretty French town. His school group had arrived last night.

Khal also remembered Mr Clarke's words at lights out. That the boarding school they were staying at had been the place where the Footballers' Battalion had billeted when they weren't fighting in the trenches. That it was an honour to be allowed to stay in such a historic place.

Khal sat up and looked around. No one else was awake. He was struck by the memory of the man he had seen on the edge of Delville Wood the night before. The soldier. And the idea that he was waiting there for Khal. Was he really waiting? Or could he be here? Now?

Khal set his feet down on the floor at the side of the bed, then tiptoed from the room. The cool tiles under his feet felt good. But the way his heart was hammering in his chest did not. Khal was nervous. But he'd just made a decision to explore the old girls' school.

The corridors were wide and ill-lit. Khal walked to the end of the building, pushed through a double door, then headed up a stone stair case.

The ghost could be here. Khal knew that. He could be round any corner.

Khal walked slowly and quietly up the staircase. His eyes were wide open. He tried not to breathe too loudly. But he saw nothing. Nothing and no-one.

'I want to talk to you,' Khal said, his voice echoing off the tile walls.

He was met by silence.

Khal stopped and stared out of an open window at Bethune Square. Cobbled. Quiet. A man in a smart-tailored suit hosing down the street outside a café.

Khal smiled. He liked France. It was elegant. Even when someone was washing the pavement.







Then the memory of the England game elbowed its way into his consciousness.

Khal sighed and turned back to the dorm. He wished he could forget *that*. At least Wales were still in the tournament and he could be happy for Grace.

The first stop of the day was a cemetery near a village called Couin. Like all the other cemeteries it was perfectly manicured. Lush green grass. Not a leaf out of place. Grace thought the cemetery was small. She counted the white graves as they gathered at one in particular. There were three hundred.

Grace shook her head. Small? Three hundred dead? That was hardly small. But compared to some of the other cemeteries they'd seen the day before, it was tiny.

Mr Clarke stood beside one of the graves. He cleared his throat.

'This,' the history teacher said, 'is the grave of Sid Wheelhouse. Sid was a tall man. A strong man. A footballer and a soldier. One night he volunteered to help rebuild a collapsed trench. He went with others out into no man's land. He was shot at, shelled and then – just before he had nearly completed his mission – he and the other men were hit by a gas attack. They didn't have time to put on their gas masks before their lungs were filled by the deadly gas. Sid died. He had played central defence for Grimsby Town. He was a friend of our former headmaster. He had a wife and two children. He was just one man. Each man here had a life, a family, a job, a home town.'

While Mr Clarke was speaking, Grace had seen a small piece of card on the grave. Once the others had dispersed to look at the names on other graves, Grace approached the grave to see what the card was. It was a little like a Match Attax Card. But old fashioned. There was a drawing of Sid Wheelhouse on it. He had black hair and a broad face. Strong eyes. He was in his twenties. Not old.

Grace looked again at his grave.

'Thank you,' she whispered.

The second stop was Delville Wood. They drove past the Footballers' Battalion Memorial that they'd seen the day before. Khal peered out of the coach windows towards the trees to see if he could spot the soldier.

Nothing to be seen.





The coach parked to the side of the woods. Then Mrs Carnegie led the Year Sevens along a path, then to a gate. Across a cleared area of wood there was a huge lawn and at the end of that a massive stone monument. As big as the school hall back home.

Trees either side.

The school group walked slowly towards the monument. Grace and Khal at the back, scanning the woods.

‘Notice the floor of the forest,’ Mrs Carnegie said. ‘It’s very uneven. Great dips and holes. Does anyone know why?’

‘Trenches, Miss?’

‘Good guess, but no,’ the librarian replied. ‘They are in fact shell craters. Wherever a shell fell, it left a hole in the ground. The shells might have been quite large. Some standing as tall as you. There are some woods in France where there are still live unexploded bombs. Still fenced off a hundred years later...’

‘He’s there,’ Khal whispered.

‘Where?’ Grace asked.

Khal pointed, but Grace could see nothing.

‘I need to go to him,’ Khal said.

‘No,’ Grace panicked. ‘You can’t just go off with a strange man.’

Khal nodded. ‘I know that. And I wouldn’t normally. But I can see *through* this man.’

‘What?’

‘He’s a ghost,’ Khal said. ‘He’s sort of... transparent. But it is safe.’

‘Well, shall I come?’ Grace asked.

‘No. I’ll go. You watch. Back me up.’

Then Khal walked towards the man. He could see him better now. A dark uniform, covered in dirt. A helmet on, the spike on top, like he had been wearing in the library archive. And when Khal got close and could look into the man’s eyes he could see they were the eyes of the boy in the school room back in the UK.

The soldier held up his hand. Just as Khal smelled burning, that smell that comes from a train when it brakes suddenly. Or when toast gets stuck in the toaster. But the thing that struck Khal, as he walked towards the man, was that he didn’t look like the pictures of Sid Wheelhouse or any other British soldiers he’d seen. His uniform was grey.





Khal stopped walking, saw the soldier's eyes register he'd stopped. And then a noise like a train rushing close, past them both, a feeling like Khal had been pushed over by someone from behind, a ringing sound in his ears. The soldier went down, then scrambled up, took Khal by the arm and pulled him towards a crater as another loud noise came over them, then a shower of soil. More smells of acrid burning like a barbeque gone wrong.

And Khal knew what it was. They were under fire.

But how? How could they be under fire in this wood? In this century? And why was the sky dark with smoke? And where were the trees? They were all stumps and splinters now. And why were there other men with them, cowering and trembling?

Khal looked at the men. Heard them shouting to each other in terrified voices. And why, he asked himself, were they shouting in German? And staring at him like he was the ghost, not them?

And what on earth was going to happen next?

**When I was researching *Over the Line* I visited the grave of Sid Wheelhouse. It had a profound effect on me, making me rewrite the whole book to do the soldiers' memories justice. You can see a short video I made at Sid's grave here: <http://tompalmer.co.uk/first-world-war-literacy-resources>. There is an image of the cigarette card that Grace sees on Sid's grave on that webpage too.**

**On Friday this week I am doing a live Twitter chat on the centenary anniversary of the beginning of the Battle of the Somme, talking about this story, *Over the Line* and the First World War. More info about that to follow tomorrow. But it looks like it will be from 1 p.m. to 3 p.m.**

**Thanks for reading, everyone. Just three episodes to go!**



# Over the Line 2016

## Chapter 14



Khal knew immediately that he was right in the middle of a war zone.

Great flashes lit the sky above him. Shrieks of bombs as they slammed into the ground. The air tearing at his clothes and skin like he was in the middle of a hurricane. Smells of burning flesh. And the bitter taste of smoke and ash filling his mouth.

Next to Khal, his soldier. And five others. All cowering in the crater, a deep pit of mud. And all eyeing Khal as if he was some sort of ghost, before peering over the rim of the crater, flinching.

Khal stared at his soldier, whose eyes were red, bloodshot. His skin was pale, smeared with mud and ash.

The soldier shouted at Khal. Strange words he could only half recognise. But Khal grasped what his soldier was trying to say. 'Escape. The enemy are coming.' And he realised the soldier was saying it in German.

And then he suddenly understood. These soldiers were German. Khal was in the enemy trenches. The soldier who he'd been seeing back at home, his ghost, was German too.

Rapidly, the other soldiers in the crater scrambled to its edge, then, calling out, launched themselves out onto no man's land.

Khal had no choice but to follow, his own soldier helping him out of the crater.

Then Khal began to move after them, ducking low like the others. Not asking where they were going. Or why. Just moving. Hoping to find refuge from the chaos.

Then another noise like a scream in the sky, as his soldier pushed him hard back into the crater, Khal rolling over and over. His ears deafened. A great shower of soil half burying him.

Khal watched over the edge of the crater to see his soldier thrown up into the air, then fall back, hitting the ground. It was just like the time he had seen all this before. Back in school. All Khal could do was scream as loud as he could.

After getting his breath back, Khal tried to find his soldier amid the horror. What he saw appalled him. His soldier lying on his back, the grisly sight of blood and bone exposed by a hole in his side.

The soldier had saved Khal. Saved him and paid for it with his own life.

And then someone was calling.





‘Khal. Khal.’

He looked around him at the freshly mown grass, the leafy trees, the monument, the string of year sevens walking around it still, taking photos.

Then at Grace’s face.

‘What happened?’ she asked urgently. ‘You... you disappeared.’

‘I was there,’ Khal gasped.

‘Where?’

‘In the war. With the Germans. With my soldier. And the British were coming. Then he was blown up again. And he fell again. And I saw him bleeding to death. Then I screamed.’

Khal put his hands to his ears.

‘Do they hurt?’ Grace asked. ‘Your ears?’

Khal nodded. Then he told Grace bit by bit what had happened, what he’d seen and heard. It poured out of him. And as he looked at her face, her eyes became wider and wider.

The coach pulled away from Delville Wood. Khal did not look back into the trees, just straight ahead. He could barely hear anything, his ears still ringing.

He was shattered.

And surprised too. Surprised that what he had just been through – whatever it was – had not completely blown his mind.

He looked at Grace, sitting next to him.

‘Better?’ she asked gently.

‘Not so bad.’

Then Khal saw Grace’s face change. Heard her breathe in.

‘I know,’ she gasped.

‘Know what?’

‘I know what it all means. Why it’s happening.’

Then a voice from the front of the coach interrupting, drowning out any chance of conversation. Mr Clarke.

‘We’re heading back to the girls’ school now. We need a good night’s rest. Tomorrow we are very privileged to be attending the official Battle of the Somme Centenary service at the Thiepval







memorial a few miles from here. We will be joined there by members of the royal family, world leaders and families who lost relatives at the Somme. It is something I doubt any of you will ever forget for your whole lives. After the service we will travel north to catch the ferry home. I am delighted to say that the coach is fitted with a live TV feed and that we'll be able to watch Wales beat Belgium en route.'

Khal saw that Grace was unmoved by the prospect of watching Wales in their quarter final. Too taken by her latest thought.

'Tell me,' Khal demanded. 'What have you worked out?'

'I know why this has been happening to you!' Grace said. 'I know why you've been haunted.'

Please visit <http://tompalmer.co.uk/first-world-war-literacy-resources/> for more free Somme related literacy resources. You can find a video about Delville Wood there too.

Tomorrow I am doing a live Twitter chat on the centenary anniversary of the beginning of the Battle of the Somme, talking about this story, *Over the Line* and the First World War. It will take place from 1 p.m. to 3 p.m. and I will be joined by a colleague from the National Literacy Trust. You're welcome to come onto Twitter – via the #OvertheLine2016 hashtag – and ask me anything you like.



# Over the Line 2016

## Chapter 15



‘Tell me what you mean,’ Khal demanded. He couldn’t understand, how could she possibly know why he was being haunted?

Grace gripped her hands together, looked hard at Khal, and then began to speak.

‘Your soldier is German,’ she said. ‘What you went through was with German soldiers, not the British. Right?’

‘Right.’

‘And we’ve always thought it was a British soldier that you were seeing because our old headmaster was in the Footballers’ Battalion, haven’t we?’

‘Yeah.’

‘Especially as this all started to happen after we found his file,’ Grace paused.

Khal stared at her, willing her to go on.

‘But we left *one* file behind, didn’t we?’ Grace said.

Khal stared at Grace, his eyes suddenly wide. Then finished her next sentence for her. ‘And it was when we didn’t look at the file with the German writing on it that I first saw the soldier,’ he said.

Grace nodded. ‘I know.’

Khal put his hands over his face. The events he had witnessed at Delville Wood came rushing back to him. The crater. His soldier saving him, being thrown into the air, then falling, fatally wounded. The blood. His face.

‘What have I done? I need to see the file,’ Khal moaned through his fingers. ‘I need to go home now. I have to tell Miss.’

Khal stood up.

Instinctively, Grace grabbed him by his arm and pulled him down.

‘You can’t,’ she said. ‘We get home tomorrow anyway. If you tell the teachers anything they’ll think you’re losing it again. Just wait a day.’

‘I can’t.’

‘You can. Tomorrow is the Somme Centenary commemoration. We’re going home straight after.’





'I don't care about that. I've got to remember *my* soldier. Or he'll still be... I don't know... still not be at rest.'

Grace could see other people looking round. On the coach. They were used to Khal being a bit high maintenance, but this agitated state was becoming more interesting to them now. She had to calm him down. And fast.

'I don't know about you,' Grace said. 'But, when I'm at the ceremony tomorrow, I'll be thinking about *all* the soldiers who took part in the war. The British. The Germans. All nationalities. When the officers blew the whistles to tell the men to come out of the trenches and attack, they were the same, but from all over the world. And the German soldiers on the other side were the same too. Young men being told to do things they can never have imagined doing. We're going there to remember them all tomorrow. Maybe you're meant to go there and remember *him*. Maybe that will help you.'

Grace judged that there were at least ten thousand people at the Thiepval War Memorial the next day. Hundreds of them were school children. Everyone was standing near a huge monument. A colossal brown and white stone arch. Around it were beautiful lawns filled with gravestones. Thousands of them.

The whole place gave Grace goose bumps. She felt so strange. As if she was carrying a weight on her shoulders. The adults and other children around her looked to Grace as if they were feeling the same. Bearing a heavy invisible sorrow between them.

In all, they stood there for an hour and a half.

Music was played by a military band. A choir sang hymns. Readings were given.

As she listened, Grace imagined the place as it had once been. A battlefield. Thousands of men facing each other off with thousands of guns. A shiver ran down her spine. She glanced at Khal. He had said nothing since they had arrived. His jaw was set firm as if he was fighting off his emotions. That morning he said he wanted to be at the ceremony. But that he wouldn't want to talk. So Grace was respecting that.

She found it impossible to imagine what he was thinking about. Was he back in the crater with his soldier? Was he seeing him suffer again? Or was it over for him? All she could do was keep her promise to him to say nothing at the time. She'd talk to him later. On the coach.





Then the ceremony began. Speeches and the laying of wreaths. Grace stood on her tiptoes to see a group of people, some in military uniforms. Prince Charles. His sons. The Duchess of Cambridge. Also, two weary looking men: David Cameron and Jeremy Corbyn.

A two-minute silence.

A bugle sounding mournfully across the graves.

Then it was over.

‘Grace?’

Grace jumped.

Khal was looking at her.

‘Yes?’ she said.

‘Thanks for making me come to this. I think you were right. I needed to be here.’

‘You’re welcome.’

Khal hesitated, then spoke again. ‘But do you think Mrs C will let us pop into the library tonight when we get back?’

Grace had to smile.

‘I’ll ask her,’ she said.

After the ceremony they boarded their coach and headed to the Channel Tunnel. Before they reached the tunnel, the coach stopped to give the Year Sevens a break. Khal went to the shop and bought a little model of Asterix, his favourite cartoon character. When he came out of the shop he saw Grace with Mrs C.

Grace put her thumb up. Khal smiled. That meant he’d get to visit the archive tonight. And have the whole weekend to read the file about the German soldiers. It was hard to imagine what he’d discover inside it.

The whole of year seven was quiet as they left France. But, once they were back in the UK, football fever began to take over.

Mr Clarke came the length of the bus handing out Welsh Cakes. Then the TVs came on. Everyone was supporting Wales.

First the national anthems.

Then the whistle for kick off.





For Grace that whistle was the hardest part of the day. The referee's whistle sounding in France on the same day one hundred years after those whistles had blown in France to send the men to their deaths.

She closed her eyes for the first minute of the match, thinking again about the Battle of the Somme. Then she gave herself to the game. And to Wales.

By the time they reached the top of the M1, Grace was not frowning, but smiling. Wales had won! They were in the semi-finals of Euro 2016. The dream was still alive.

The Battlefield Tour coach pulled up at school just after midnight. It was a warm evening. Khal smelled the fresh Yorkshire air and smiled. It was good to be home.

His mum and dad were waiting with the other parents. Amani too, looking excited, her eyes flitting around the crowd, searching for him.

There were hugs and a few tears, mostly from parents.

Khal walked up to his family, knelt down and handed Amani the model of Asterix he'd bought in France. At first she looked at it like she didn't understand. Then she smiled and threw her arms around her brother.

'I have to fetch something from school,' Khal said looking up at his parents. They both nodded.

Then Khal walked with Mrs C and Grace, to the library. Mrs C switched the light on and led him upstairs to the archive. The file was still there. But that was all.

'Thanks Miss,' Khal said. Grace said thank you too.

'You're welcome, Khalid and Grace,' the librarian said. 'Listen? Would either of you be interested giving one of the presentations to year seven and eight on Monday?'

Khal looked at Grace, she back at him. And then Khal heard himself say that yes, that it'd be fine, he'd be happy to give a presentation. Then he walked, with Grace, the file under his arm, wondering why he'd agreed to that.







‘I think you should open that by yourself,’ Grace suggested, eyeing the slim file. ‘In your own time.’

‘I think so too,’ Khal smiled. But he was already wondering exactly what he was going to find inside it.

**For the purposes of the story, I had to write into the future covering this evening’s Wales v Belgium game. I am sorry I had to give away the result! I hope it doesn’t spoil the game for you.**

This afternoon I will be joining members of the National Literacy Trust to answer questions about *Over the Line*, the Battle of the Somme and anything else anyone wants to ask. Please join us on the hashtag **#OvertheLine2016** from 1.00 p.m. to 3.00 p.m. We would love to hear from you.

If you students would like a signed certificate from Tom to say they have read *Over the Line 2016*, you will be able to access them from Monday at <http://tompalmer.co.uk/first-world-war-literacy-resources>.

**There is one episode of *Over the Line 2016* left. It will be published here from 7.30 a.m. on Monday 4<sup>th</sup> July. Have a good weekend.**



# Over the Line 2016

## Chapter 16



Khal stood up and walked to the front of the school hall.

His heart was hammering like it always did when he was nervous. But he could handle it. This time. What was walking to the front of a school assembly compared to running out into no man's land and facing a thousand bullets? And, anyway, he had something he needed to do on behalf of the school's former head teacher, William Barker.

Khal was glad that Grace had helped him to write the words he was about to say. She had come over to his house on Sunday. She was amazing at finding the right words. And Grace had been in a seriously good mood after the football. Wales beating Belgium. Wales qualifying for the semi-final of Euro 2016. Wales being this. Wales being that. And Khal couldn't have been happier for her.

When he reached the front of the hall, Khal breathed in and out like his dad had taught him. He studied the faces looking back at him. Found Grace's smile easily. Then began to read from his sheet of paper.

'On Friday night the year seven Battlefield Trip coach arrived back at school,' Khal read. 'We had an amazing and sad time at the Somme. We found out a lot. I learned that men from dozens of nationalities around the world were killed, injured or changed forever by what they'd had to go through. It taught me that war is a terrible thing. And that, if we can, we should try to avoid it.'

Khal looked at the expressions on people's faces. They were solemn on the whole. The way people always looked when the First World War was being talked about.

'Of course, it was less educational watching England in Nice,' Khal said.

Khal saw some tentative smiles. Then heard a few gentle laughs. Grace had been right that he should make a small joke before he talked about the things he was going to talk about.

'When we got back from France,' Khal went on, 'I collected a file from the library archive that I should have read before we left for the Somme. It was one of the files that William Barker, our old head teacher kept. He had been researching other footballers who fought in battles he fought in. I found two letters in the file. And a photograph of a soldier. I'm going to read the letters to you now.'

Khal felt a sudden heat flush up his neck and face. He knew it was a wave of emotion that he needed to keep control of. He swallowed. Breathed. Breathed again.

He could do this.

He needed to do this.





No turning back.

‘Dear Mother and Father

I hope you are both well. We are in fitter shape now it is summer. And my cough is better. Thank you, mother, for sending me the cough medicine. We are in a good position, at the top of a hill. The enemy are at the bottom. They attack us. On foot and with shells. But they are not making ground. Our advantage is too strong. There are far worse places to be on the front line. We are lucky here.

Please tell my little sister, Anna, that I miss her. I miss your cooking too, mother. And the smell of your pipe, father. I also miss playing football at the club.

When I close my eyes and try to sleep I imagine I am on the football field at the club. With Thomas and the others. Waiting for the ball to come to my feet. Scoring goals. And I keep in my head my dream to be a great football player who will be known and talked about for a century. It is the way I pretend I am not here.

But do not worry. I am well. I have my dreams to sustain me. Give Anna a kiss. Tell her I will be home soon.

Good wishes to all.

Max.’

Khal was sure that the soldier he had been seeing – and been with that day at Delville Wood in the mud – was Max. The photograph in the file had been blurred, but Khal had known it was him. His eyes. His mouth. His hair.

‘That was one of two letters I found in William Barker’s file,’ Khal read to the assembly. ‘The other was from Max Schulte’s parents.’

Khal paused and saw some of the faces in the hall change. He’d used Max’s surname. Given the game away. Now his audience understood that Khal was talking about and reading the letters of a German soldier, not a British one.

But he pushed on.

‘William Barker translated Max’s letter from German. Max was an Infantryman. The second letter from the file is addressed to our own former headmaster. It’s from Max’s parents. A reply to a letter he must have sent to them, but that we have no copy of.

‘Dear Mr Barker

It is with great honour that we receive your letter. It is many years since we lost our dear Max in that terrible war. We and his sister, Anna, have never come from under the cloud of that loss.

You are right to say that he was a football player. He was registered with Ballspielverein Borussia 09 e.V Dortmund. He was a centre forward. As you can see from the copy of the





letter we enclose, he loved the game of football. It is pleasing to know that you were a football player too. To think of you in your trench and he – maybe only yards from you – dreaming of his football games. It makes us smile. A little. If only you could have met and talked about the game you both loved.

We wish you and your country well, Sir.

Faithfully yours – Herr and Frau Schulte

Khal swallowed. He'd nearly done it. He felt close to tears. He felt panic. But he had to do this. Just had one more thing to read out. He stared at the hall full of children and teachers. Breathed in, then out, then began again.

'Year seven were very lucky to go to commemorate the centenary of the Battle of the Somme in France. We stood there and remembered all those British, French and Commonwealth soldiers. Those men fought and were killed or injured or changed forever for our country. We must never forget them. Like we should never forget this German soldier.

It is nice to think that – thanks to our former head master and the file we found in the library archive – we can remember Max Schulte a hundred years later. Just like he wanted. As a footballer.'

Khal caught Grace's eye, smiled, then walked back to the rest of his classmates and sat down.

## **The End**

Thank you very much for reading this story. Thank you too for the lovely messages. It means a lot to me that so many of you have enjoyed it. Thank you on behalf of myself and Grace and Khal.

If your teachers – or parents – have been reading it to you, please give them a round of applause. [Pause.] Thank you to the National Literacy Trust for hosting the story. Especially to Gemma who has managed the project superbly. And, finally, to my wife who has read every chapter, often late at night, and given me excellent editorial advice.

**You can order copies of my book *Over the Line* (not this story, but the story of Sid Wheelhouse and the Footballers' Battalion) from [www.barringtonstoke.co.uk](http://www.barringtonstoke.co.uk) with a discount of 20% until 8<sup>th</sup> July if you use the code SOMME16. You can find out more about the book here: <http://tompalmer.co.uk/over-the-line>.**

**If you would like to download certificates for children who have followed *Over the Line* 2016, please visit [www.tompalmer.co.uk/first-world-war-literacy-resources](http://www.tompalmer.co.uk/first-world-war-literacy-resources).**

**Thank you.**

