

I. Anything Goes

Northwestern French Algeria, December 1936

And though I'm not a great romancer

I know that you're bound to answer

When I propose,

Anything goes!

Catherine DeWitt spread her arms and threw back her head as the audience in the Le Pacha lounge applauded the end of her song and her set. Applause was her drug. Forget cocaine, forget Champagne; an adoring audience could send her soaring as high as her aerobic performances once had.

The bright lights of the city's colonial administration dominated tonight's audience, mostly uniformed French army and naval officers with their too-stylish-to-be-wives female companions. They spread out before her dais in a sea of olive, navy blue, and floral colors fogged by the smokescreen raised by their Gauloises and Gitanes Brunes. The Hotel Royale, Oran's best, hired her because she could sing in both French and English; she'd given them value for their money.

As the clapping faded, Kate cradled the microphone in her hands and purred in French, "*Merci à tous*. It's been a joy to entertain you. Please show your appreciation for the band." She swept a hand toward the Algerian jazz trio behind her. The noise swelled again. She took another deep draw from their approval, then said, "This is my last show here. I leave Oran in the

morning. Have a memorable evening, and *au revoir* to you all.”

She left the dais waving to the crowd, then stepped smartly through the swinging double doors separating the bar’s dark wood and soft lights from the hotel kitchen’s noise and glare. She glanced at her favorite wristwatch—a white-gold, Art Deco Elgin left over from her better days—while she slalomed past the cooking staff on her way to the service lift behind the kitchen. It was late but not indecently so, at least, not for the next few minutes. All she needed.

The aromas of a dozen dinners bewitched her stomach. Eating well had been a sometime sort of thing lately. Beside the few francs per set in cash, the hotel had provided her with a small and plain but cozy room and one meal a day. Her other meals depended on what she could steal from the marketplace. She’d gained a great deal of experience in petty thievery since her Knights of the Sky flying circus stopped feeding its performers some weeks before.

The brass arrow on the dial above the lift doors showed the cab stopped at the third floor. The service stairs were close, but climbing four flights in that dress and those shoes was simply not on. Her white, floor-length Schiaparelli gown (at least, a copy she’d ordered in Cairo the year before) made brisk walking unlikely, never mind mountaineering.

Kate rocked side-to-side on her high-heeled pumps as the brass arrow ground slowly anti-clockwise—down. *Don’t fidget. Don’t look about. Don’t act guilty. All you’re doing is returning to your room in the most expedient way.* All good advice to herself, except being a woman in an evening gown standing in the clamor and heat of an industrial kitchen already drew more attention than she wanted.

As she waited for the arthritic lift to inch its way down forty feet of shaft, she hummed “Anything Goes” to unknot her stomach. She adored Cole Porter and would happily bear his children. She loved everything he ever wrote, but “Anything Goes” most of all. He might have

written it about her life for the past decade. She knew the words in three languages and longed to hear the fabled Cantonese version.

A bell pinged. The lift doors rumbled open. The young waiter inside pushed out his serving cart, laden with empty tableware. He flashed her a saucy smile, then trundled his trolley into the kitchen.

At last! She leapt into the cab, wrestled the doors shut, then slammed the brass handle to the left. The wretched lift—roughly the size and shape of a prison cell—lurched and squealed upward.

Her dead mother's less-than-helpful voice sounded off in Kate's head, unwanted and unbidden—just like Mother in life. *Leave! Leave now, before you're ruined.*

I can't! Kate shot back. *I need this. Michael needs his mother. I need to—*

You might've given that a thought before you abandoned him.

I didn't abandon him. It only felt that way.

At last, the lift wheezed to a halt at the fourth floor, where the suites were. Kate marched quick-time down a corridor far more posh than the one outside her modest room two floors down. She took care to smile at the few people she passed. Butterflies started dive-bombing her dinner. Stealing a piece of fruit or a demi-baguette was one thing, but what she intended to do in the next few minutes was madness. Necessary madness, but still entirely mental.

Soon enough, she found herself facing a brass door plaque: "417."

Why are you doing this? Mother again. *You're better than this, or you were.*

This was no time for a debate, mental or otherwise. Kate needed the money if she wanted to see her son again. Honesty might be the best policy, but it had gotten her nowhere.

No one answered her vigorous knocking on the door. Anyone inside was deaf, sleeping

soundly, or deceased; any of the three would do. Her hand shook as she pulled a pin from her dark-brown chignon, bent it, then fiddled it into the keyhole. But the lock was already open. She twisted the carved brass doorknob and pushed. It shouldn't move, but it did.

Someone was already inside. Not the colonel; he'd have answered her knock—unless he couldn't.

Last chance to turn back.

"Too late," Kate whispered to herself. *In for a penny...*

EXCERPT

II. Scene of the Crime

Two mornings before

A handsome young Spanish lieutenant appeared at Kate's hotel-room door with an invitation from his superior, a Lieutenant Colonel Fernando Maria Alcalá de Calderón of the *Fuerza Aérea Nacional*—Generalissimo Franco's rebel air force. The note asked if she would consider joining the colonel and his guests for refreshments. "I witnessed your thrilling performance at the flight exhibition in Algiers," it said in excellent English script, "and wish to congratulate you and discuss matters pertaining to aviation."

How refreshing—this colonel apparently considered her a pilot, not a singing tart. How could she possibly refuse?

A comfortable array of last decade's furniture gleamed in the morning sun streaming through the suite's blinds. Colonel Alcalá clicked his heels and kissed Kate's hand, then introduced her to four of his staff officers and three wives of the local garrison's senior leadership. The colonel certainly cut an attractive figure in his smart double-breasted, navy-blue uniform, three gold braid stripes around his cuffs, and gleaming black dress shoes. The other ladies also clearly noticed.

Kate accepted her tea with thanks and perched on an overstuffed leather armchair. The colonel leaned back into a well-oiled brown leather sofa and regaled the group with a detailed account of the aerobatic acts he'd seen two weeks before in Algiers, including Kate's. Like most pilots, he flew with his hands while he spoke. He had rather graceful hands. A sprinkle of gray

attractively seasoned the black hair on his temples. He spoke quite good but duskily-accented English, a treat to hear. She looked for things like that in a man—his voice, his hands, his eyes (the colonel's were dark and warm). What a lovely way to spend a morning!

Then a garrison wife asked about the “stirring defense of Toledo” at the end of September three months past. Alcalá told a story full of the rebels' heroism and gallantry in defending the Alcázar against the government's troops. The garrison ladies cooed their congratulations.

Kate remembered what the French and British papers said: the rebels' mass slaughter of prisoners, rape and looting on an industrial scale, and the murder of hundreds, perhaps thousands of people whose only crime was to belong to a labor union or vote for the government's Popular Front. All Kate's mooning over the colonel collapsed into a sodden lump in her stomach.

In time, the staff officers melted away on one errand or another. The garrison ladies found their own company more interesting than they did Kate's. She decided to make her apologies and leave. Before she could, though, the colonel asked her to accompany him to his office. A few minutes earlier, she would've gladly followed him into the nearest pantry or wardrobe, but now she wasn't keen on close contact with a fascist shill. Still, she went along until she saw he'd led her to a bedroom. She halted and drew herself up to her full five feet and six. “Colonel Alcalá, I must—”

“Please do not be alarmed, Lady DeWitt. It is my office while I am here.”

She warily followed him into the room. *If I scream, will the garrison ladies help me?* But the white linen dust sheet on the bed and the heavy, dark-wood desk set between the two French doors onto the balcony eased her fears a bit.

The colonel crouched to open a small floor safe next to the desk. She noted the

combination over his shoulder (of course she peeked), then caught a glimpse of a sheaf of banknotes and a small, blue velvet bag atop a stack of file folders. The bag's contents clicked and flowed in a most familiar way as he extracted a brown folder from the pile. She could guess what filled that little bag. *Very, very interesting.*

Then she saw the brown folder's contents and lost interest in a mere bag of gemstones.

Now

Kate shook away the memory and eased the door closed behind her, pausing a moment to let her eyes adjust to the murk. A single lamp glowed yellow on the dark-wood console against the parlor's left wall, throwing barely enough light to keep her from tumbling over the furniture. Once she could see again, she made a quick survey of the colonel's bedroom and *en suite*. Both were predictably grand and usefully uninhabited.

She crossed through the parlor again, then tiptoed into the colonel's makeshift office, which she had seen during her previous visit. A small, green-shaded lamp left a puddle of light on the desktop. Her eyes cut immediately to the safe.

The door gaped open.

A bolt of panic speared her heart. She flew to the safe and knelt to plumb the inside. The blue bag and the currency were gone. *Blast it all!*

Kate rose carefully, casting about for something, anything that might help. She'd counted on that bag of gemstones and the cash to get her home, to make her whole, to right her world. She allowed herself one brief wallow in despair, then shoved it away. *Now what?*

She searched all the desk drawers and the safe: no more cash or velvet bags. Every little noise had her fit to jump out of her skin—a gurgle from the radiator, a footfall upstairs, the

whoosh of a flushing W.C.

However, the safe yielded the brown folder of plans and photos the colonel had shown her two mornings before. She spread it open on the desktop. The papers featured a Messerschmitt 109—a new, streamlined German monoplane fighter with an enclosed cockpit, retracting landing gear, a high-performance engine, and two machine guns in the nose. It would soon be fighting for the fascists in Spain.

The plans could be as valuable as diamonds to the right buyer. At least, so she hoped.

Kate selected a sheet with a profile, plan, and front view to scale, and a photo of senior German officers inspecting the actual aircraft. She folded the plan small enough to hide in her girdle (far more uncomfortable than smuggling a flask there), then re-locked all the desk drawers. She knelt to return the folder to the safe.

Something rustled behind her.

She craned over her shoulder but saw only shadows. Kate listened so hard she thought she might sprain her ears. Nothing.

When she stood, a freight train slammed into her head.



Kate's eyelids fluttered open. Every light in the suite stabbed daggers into her eyes. Her brain no longer fit her skull despite the cool, damp towel draped over her forehead. When she focused—an exercise in sheer will—she saw nothing but tufted brown leather. The sofa, long enough for her to stretch out with her head on a throw pillow. When she tentatively rolled her head to her right, she found a pair of warm, dark eyes peering intently at her. “Oh. Colonel.”

“*Señora DeWitt.*” Colonel Alcalá leaned forward on a chair set next to the sofa and put on a concerned smile. “You’ve returned to us.”

Now she had to be careful: she still wasn't entirely coherent, the colonel would have questions, and she had to somehow stick to the story she'd worked up over the past day and a half. Male French voices leaked from his makeshift office. *Police?*

She took a moment to herd her straying thoughts together. "What...what happened?"

"I hoped you could tell me. Why are you here?"

Kate winced—not entirely acting—then briefly closed her eyes. "I...my performance ended. I planned to...to leave tomorrow. I thought I'd see if you were here. Perhaps...perhaps you'd want to continue our conversation."

He frowned. It didn't make him any less distractingly attractive. "But why are you in my suite?"

Various parts of Kate's brain began to come to their senses. They all ached, but they seemed to work given enough urging. "Your door was ajar. You didn't answer my knock. I became concerned. When I noticed the light, I went into your office and saw the safe was open. That's all I remember. What happened?"

Alcalá gently lifted her right hand and warmed it between both of his. "The gendarmes say you were hit by a club or perhaps a blackjack. Did you see anyone?"

"No." At least she didn't need to lie about that. "Was anything stolen?"

"Yes. I fear some valuables are missing from the safe."

Right on cue, her lower abdomen began to throb beneath the aircraft plan sheet and photo stuffed into her girdle. She managed to lift her head enough to survey her hips. No telltale rectangle gave away her secret yet. Would the gendarmes search her? If so, how thoroughly? She sagged back onto the cushion. "I'm sorry I couldn't stop him." *Whoever he was*. It couldn't be common knowledge that Alcalá kept gemstones in his safe. *A hotel employee? One of his staff*

officers?

“Don’t apologize.” He squeezed her hand. “I’m happy you are not injured more than you are. And, who can say what else he would have stolen had you not interrupted him?” Alcalá’s eyes gazed into hers. “Shall I call a doctor?”

“No, thank you.” A doctor would be far more likely to undress her than would a copper, and she couldn’t have that. “Could I bother you for some aspirin?”

“Of course.” The colonel graced her with a warm smile—*such a lovely smile*—then disappeared into his bedroom.

While he was gone, Kate struggled to sit up, hoping the crackling-paper noises from her midriff didn’t attract attention. By the time the colonel returned with two tablets and a tumbler of water, she sat upright and even managed a smile of gratitude. “Thank you so much. Sorry to be a bother.”

“No bother at all.” He sat while he watched her gulp the pills and water. “For the record, I would have enjoyed continuing our conversation.”

“So would I. Unfortunately, I’m in no condition to think.” *How do I get out of this place without raising suspicion?* She could play the wounded bird—she already was—no matter how much she hated that ploy. “I should go. I’ve caused enough trouble. Could a gendarme escort me to my room?”

Alcalá glanced toward the second bedroom door. “I believe they’re busy. Might I be an acceptable substitute?” He stood and offered her both his hands.

“Of course.” She took his hands, and he pulled her to her feet. They stood face-to-face with little more than a foot separating them. His warmth coiled around her; the woody scent of his cologne teased her nostrils. She let the moment linger longer than she planned, then flashed

him her best smile. “You’re too kind.”

No gendarmes stood guard at Kate’s far-less-grand room near the stairwell on the second floor. The colonel bowed his head, wished her a good night, then paced away. Part of her wanted to call him back, but this was definitely not the time for that.

She locked the door from the inside and barred it with her only chair. Her body and soul were drained, her nerves raw and twitchy, her hands trembling. She sank onto the single bed with a sigh of relief that lasted forever. For the moment—but only for the moment—she was safe. Whatever *safe* meant.

III. On the Wing

Kate had needed the colonel's gemstones to carry on. That's all she ever did now: *carry on*. Carry on dribbling money into an account that might someday hire a solicitor good enough to break the writ that kept her from seeing her son. Carry on flinging money into the bottomless pit that was Dauntsey Park, her childhood home, and by extension keep her father alive so he could continue to not speak to her.

She longed for a hot bath and a stiff drink. She was warm and comfortable for now. She could wait until morning, then leave like any innocent, respectable person: rested, fed, and at her leisure.

But.

How long had the thief (or, as she thought of him, *the other thief*) watched her in the colonel's temporary office? He must have seen her hike her gown above her hips to shove the stolen papers into her girdle. If the gendarmes caught him between now and morning—not impossible, given the political pressure they'd be under—what would be his first move?

Someone else was there. A woman in a white dress. I saw her steal something from the safe and hide it in her pants. I know what she looks like. Did you look for her?

Tempting as it was, she couldn't stay. She couldn't risk it. When the coppers started searching for her, she needed to be long gone. One night in an Algerian jail cell was one too many for Kate. She'd drown herself in the harbor rather than revisit that special version of Hell.

Kate's faithful yellow Tizlite suitcase lay on the bed, already packed; she added her

evening gown to its load. She emptied her battered brown-leather valise, stashed the airplane plans and the photo in the false bottom, removed what remained of her cash, then refilled it with folded clothes. Then she changed into a black greatcoat over a long-sleeved white blouse, high-waisted navy-blue trousers, and two-tone saddle shoes. Her hair could stay loose for now.

Practical shoes let her manage the stairs without risking her neck. Once on the ground floor, she slipped behind a potted palm to survey the lobby, alive with guests and gendarmes. Did coppers pay close attention to youngish, dark-haired women? None she could see.

Satisfied, she tugged down the brim of her Panama hat to obscure her face, gathered her tattered confidence around her, then marched boldly across the marble floor toward the doors. Choking the life out of the valise's handles kept her hand from shaking off its wrist. Her neck tensed, waiting to hear "stop her!"

It never came.

The cold night air hung heavy with future rain and the smells of the nearby port. Clouds like black tapioca hid every star in the sky. She stopped to set down her luggage for a moment and scan the area for threats.

Three- and four-story French stone buildings blocked the horizon. A few *Gendarmerie* cars dotted the street. A young gendarme lounging against a nearby auto shot her an exploratory glance through his cigarette smoke. She dearly hoped he thought her worth a leer and not that he was on the lookout for her. Just in case, she turned away to peer into her chrome-and-enamel Art Deco compact.

Three more gendarmes stepped out of the hotel and gathered on the sidewalk. Standing under the hotel's awning a few feet from the main doors was *not* a smart place to be. Hire a taxi?

Don't be ridiculous. Mother sounded pleased with herself, as she usually did. *No self-*

respecting driver will stop for a woman riding alone.

Quite so. Kate steeled herself to re-enter the lobby and ask for help, though it would call attention to her abrupt departure. She had to hope she'd be far from Algerian airspace before anyone decided to call her a suspect rather than a victim.

Kate put on as forlorn a look as possible for the head bellman. He took pity on her, and in moments, a dusty, blunt-snouted old Renault pulled up to the hotel's entry. The bellman held open the rear door for her, then loaded her suitcase and leather valise on the floor. Kate tipped him a few precious francs. Maybe he'd think kindly of her when the gendarmes started asking questions.

She told the driver, "*Aérodrome, s'il vous plaît,*" then settled into the threadbare back seat to let her heartbeat settle and to plot her next move. When the Knights ran out its string, the Durães sisters—twins who put on a truly insane wing-walking act—invited her to Lisbon for a visit. That meant flying west to Tangier, then across the strait to Portugal.

If the colonial police took umbrage at her sudden departure, they might be on the telegraph that moment warning anyplace within flying range that Kate should be arrested on sight. *Where can I go?*

Where do I need to go?

Kate no longer had a job. No show schedule to tell her where to go and to give shape to her days. Papa had banished her from her real home eight years ago. The assortment of freaks and madmen she flew with had been her only family since the divorce and ensuing scandal. She'd wept when the last ones departed that final time. Now here she was, literally singing for her supper.

Without knowing any better, it made some sense to her that the aircraft plan hiding in her

valise was worth something to only a relatively small circle diplomats and military men. Could she sell it back to the Nationalists? She didn't fancy being pushed against a wall and shot. The Republicans might be keen, but they were poor as church mice. Given what the papers said about the state of things in Madrid, they might shoot her, too.

Charlie's in Barcelona.

Her brother—The Honorable Charles Emerson Gorham III—was two years older and (in his estimation, at least) decades wiser than Kate. He'd worked since March as a commercial secretary at the consulate in Barcelona.

Charlie will know what to do with the plan.

She closed her eyes and visualized the western Mediterranean. Cartagena, safely tucked into Republican Spain's coast, lay due north from Oran. An easy heading to keep, even at night. If she missed the city, she could hardly miss the Iberian Peninsula. She could rest and refuel using what remained of her money, then follow the coast to Barcelona in one hop.

She glanced out the side window. The sky had grown more forbidding in a few minutes. Her stomach clenched at the sight. Flying north meant flying through that muck.

By then, they'd left behind the European city's manicured parks and blocks of smart offices and flats. Streetlights disappeared along with trams and electricity as the taxi rolled south on Route Nationale 6, the only paved road knifing through the Arab city. Low, boxy, white or tan native structures surrounded them, their square windows glowing yellow with candle- or lantern-light. Kate loved how in the desert, it took but minutes to fly or drive from the twentieth century to the last millennium or the dawn of creation.

Is all this too easy?

Kate had been told she wasn't paranoid enough, usually by people who were too paranoid

for their own good, so she didn't listen. She hadn't checked if the taxi was flying solo.

Two sets of headlamps broke the darkness far behind the taxi. Kate had no way to tell if the cars belonged to the gendarmes or the army. They showed no signs of trying to catch her up. Wouldn't the authorities be trying harder? The idea didn't unknot her stomach one bit.

Town gave way to farms, then to desert. One set of headlamps turned off the road, while the other continued to follow her taxi at a discreet distance. With luck, it headed for the military airbase, or to La Sènia or Valmy beyond.

Kate resumed gnawing on her most current dilemma. If she got anything at all for the Messerschmitt plans, it surely won't be as much as the diamonds would've fetched. After Papa disowned her, Kate's solicitor told her she should have at least five hundred pounds in hand before she once more took on her former husband and current *bête noire* for access to her son. A fearsome sum even when she had regular work; now it loomed like a mountain range she could neither climb nor fly over. Her Barclay's "revenge" account cocooned a bit more than a hundred pounds. She'd already siphoned a few pounds here and there to eat and keep a roof over herself and petrol in Buster, her faithful two-seat Martinsyde Buzzard biplane.

And every day, Michael grew older and forgot her more. Soon he won't need her.

The taxi finally turned off the road into the airfield. The car following the taxi continued down the road to points beyond. *Did I get away? Are they waiting for me here?*

"*Madame?*" The driver spoke for the first time in what seemed like hours.

Kate searched for her voice. Between singing and everything else, then her prolonged silence, finding it took some doing. "*Oui, désolé.* That line of small hangars on the south side? Take me to the third hangar from the far end."

She paid the driver—*adieu* to most of her francs—then paused to check the angry,

impenetrable blackness of the northern sky. A rising wind already scoured the concrete apron, and imminent rain made the air damp and heavy. No time to spare. She heaved open the hangar door and fumbled on the overhead lights.

Buster rested quietly on the hangar's east floor. The lights gleamed off his white wings and fuselage. From where she stood, she could pretend his fabric skin was still glossy and that the diagonal blue stripes wrapped around his body behind his wings didn't have chips and worn spots. The poor beast needed an overhaul and new paint—another expense that will push seeing her son farther into the future.

Stop standing about feeling sorry for yourself and do something.

Kate hauled her Forces kit bag from the rear cockpit and dumped its contents on the concrete floor. She stripped to her tap pants and brassiere, then pulled on a scratchy wool union suit, shearling-lined leather trousers, insulated boots, and her lined leather jacket. She'd become the very picture of Bibendum, the Michelin Man. When she flew at altitude in an open cockpit, though, she truly couldn't care how she looked so long as she didn't freeze.

Now she faced a dilemma. Like nearly every aircraft of his vintage, Buster had no starter switch; someone had to turn his propeller to get the engine going. She needed help in at midnight on the cusp of what promised to be a wicked storm. By the time she packed away her luggage, fat raindrops crashed into the hangar's metal roof. *Oh, bother.*

If a caretaker existed on this end of the airfield, he wasn't in the small, grimy office taking up the hangar's back corner. Kate draped herself with her rain slicker and trudged through the downpour into the next hangar. An Arab man in a much-stained boiler suit dozed there in a half-ruined club chair. She kicked the chair twice. "Are you alive?" she asked in French.

The man peeled open one bloodshot eye. "*Oui, Madame.*" His groan suggested he'd

rather not be.

“I need you to prop my aeroplane so I can leave here.”

His other eye opened. Both eyes swiveled to the half-open hangar door. “In this?”

“Yes, in this. Please, the longer I stay, the worse it’ll be.”

The man scrubbed his face with his palms, then rocked out of his chair. He wasn’t much taller than Kate but moved as if he was twice as heavy. “Do you have a gun?” he asked in roughly accented but fluent French.

Not the question she expected. “Why do you ask?”

“If you have a gun, you can put it to your head and kill yourself much faster than this storm will, and you can leave your airplane to your children.”

“Thank you for your advice. I still need you to prop my aeroplane.”

The man sighed. “If you want.” He wrestled on an already-sodden hooded yellow poncho, then plodded toward the open door. “This storm will be gone by the morning.”

Cones of watery light knifed through the rain from near the airfield’s main gate. Kate stopped to stare at the four pairs of headlamps in convoy on the highway just outside the fence. Her stomach wadded itself into a ball. She knew who was in those vehicles, and she knew she didn’t want to meet them. “I fear I can’t wait that long. I have to get off the ground *now*.”

The Arab glanced over his shoulder at the lights. “Are those friends of yours?”

“I strongly doubt it. Hurry!”

They jogged—the quickest Kate could move in her flight kit—to the hangar sheltering Buster. While the Arab slid open both main doors, Kate threw herself into Buster’s cockpit and set his mixture and throttle for starting. She glanced outside: the headlamps streamed through the gate and headed toward the hangars. “What’s your name?”

“Djamel, *Madame*.” He bowed slightly.

“Djamel, I need to be on the runway before that lot is.” She thrust her pointing hand toward the rapidly approaching autos.

“*Bien sûr, Madame*.” As he shuffled to Buster’s nose, he said, “I knew a very good pilot once. His name was Bernard. He, too, tried to fly in a storm like this. He never returned.” Djamel shook a finger at Kate. “When you meet Allah, please tell him I tried to save you.”

She already recognized that she aimed to do something remarkably stupid. However, being torn apart in a thunderstorm seemed a better outcome than living in an Algerian prison. “When I meet Him, I’ll give Him your regards.”

The headlamps drew closer. Djamel slowly rotated the prop twice to break any vacuum lock and circulate the oil in Buster’s engine, then heaved down on the propeller. The engine rumbled to life.

Kate stole one last look at the only thing she had left of her son—a photo taken when he was four and a half years old—whispered, “Someday, my darling,” then tucked it into an oilskin envelope with her passport and stuffed it all into her jacket’s inside breast pocket. Djamel stood by with the rope for the wheel chocks firmly in hand. “Thank you, Djamel!” she shouted above the engine’s roar. The closest set of headlamps had almost reached the hangar. “Chocks out!”

With the wheels free, Kate said a little prayer and rolled into the black cascade.

IV. Into the Dark Beyond

The storm swallowed Kate before she'd climbed five hundred feet over the airfield. Heading north, she couldn't find an altitude between zero and ten thousand feet—the highest she dared go—that didn't promise her an early and unpleasant death. Buster's propeller shot rain at her faster and harder than a fire hose. The windscreen didn't even slow the deluge. In minutes, she was soaked to the skin and trembling with cold.

You wanted the romance of flying, Mother sneered. Here it is.

Wiltshire, 1916

Kate was born in the same year as powered flight.

When she was a girl, aviators were always at the forefront of exploration and adventure. She begged Papa to read to her the newspaper stories of great achievements—the first flight to such-and-so, the longest flight, the highest, the fastest. She imagined herself discovering new worlds from the cockpit.

Then one day, her dreams came true.

Halfway through the Great War, Papa told her that Viscount DeWitt (the elder, not the one she married) allowed the War Office set up a training airfield on his land north of Langley Burrell. The news thrilled Kate; there'd be a real, live aerodrome within an easy ride from home!

Once the field opened in September, she rode Trudy—Kellaway Gertrude, her Welsh Cob mare—to the field outside the base's fence. As Trudy grazed, Kate lounged in the grass and

watched the student pilots take off and land in their Avro 504 trainers, seemingly just beyond her reach. The airplanes turned lazy circles around the sky while she pictured herself at the controls. Her flying hero just then was Marie Marvingt, a French athlete and explorer who won the *Croix de guerre* for bombing a German base in Metz the year before. Could she be like Marie? Everything seemed possible then.

By the next summer, it wasn't enough to watch from the sidelines any longer. Kate had to get *closer*, see the airplanes near at hand. Food proved the ticket. She brought fruit from her home orchards or fresh-baked biscuits from the kitchen and weaseled her way onto the airfield to talk to the pilots and mechanics. The dour airfield commander warned her to watch herself around the men, and she overheard him ordering the pilots to not even think of trifling with Lord Gorham's daughter. To a gawky fourteen-year-old Kate, the thought that pilots might think her worth trifling with was a little frightening—and more than a bit thrilling.

Another year passed. Then Lieutenant Frank Conklin changed her life forever.

Now

A sharp sideways lurch booted Kate out of her thoughts. It was as if some great terrier had grabbed Buster in its mouth, trying to shake him—and her—to pieces. Her inner ear told her they were flying tilted on Buster's port wings; she couldn't see the compass well enough to tell if they were turning, but her stomach wagered they weren't.

She wrestled them back to what felt like straight-and-level, then wiped the water off the compass dial. A few points east of north. There wasn't enough light to see her watch dial. How long since she took off? It seemed like ages.

She shook out her shoulders as best she could while strapped into her seat. Black sky

wrapped all around; the world had well and truly vanished. The engine's rumble hardly intruded through the howling wind.

Frank would be so proud if he could see me—or he'd think me barking mad.

Wiltshire, 1918

Kate met Frank Conklin before that fine early Thursday afternoon of 12 September 1918—a date forever stamped on her memory. The cocky flight instructor from the north—Blackpool? Bolton?—had go-to-the-devil attitude enough for two men. He'd worked his way up from aerial gunner to pilot but wore his lieutenant's pips lightly. The then-new Royal Air Force tolerated him, she'd been told, because it still despaired of finding instructor pilots with combat experience, which he had in spades.

By then she'd become a hazard to herself and others: a precocious fifteen-year-old who'd learned the effect a smile and batted eyelashes had on young men. Kate didn't flirt with them, exactly. She *did* know she was the only woman of any age to pay attention to the ragged little field. She could feel the men's eyes follow her progress from the maintenance shed down the flightline, and she noticed how eagerly the pilots snapped to when she arrived at their tiedowns. But most of them treated her like a stray dog or cat. All except for Conklin.

Conklin leaned casually against the leading edge of his Avro's lower wing and grinned at her as she approached. "Fine day, ain't it, miss?"

"It is indeed, Lieutenant." Kate tossed him an apple from her basket. He caught and bit into it in one motion. "Haven't they enough work for you?"

He chuckled. "It's all this 'peace' talk, don't y'know. The R-A-F"—he prolonged the letters—"reckons maybe it don't need so many pilots now. So here I wait for punters." He tossed

his head toward the fuselage. “Fancy a go?”

Her heart and brain stumbled. “Um—you mean...flying?”

“Exactly that.” Conklin pushed off from the wing. “As keen as you are for flying? You oughter go up a time or two yer own self.”

She stood there with her mouth hanging open long enough for her teeth to dry out. “Um. Um. Yes. Yes! *Yes!*”

Now

Lightning split the sky to Kate’s two o’clock, a huge flashbulb in a darkened room. For a moment, she was blind. Then all she could see was a negative image of Buster’s wing ribs, the struts and guy wires, even his propeller frozen in place. Though she braced for it, she never heard the thunder—the engine’s roar and the storm’s scream drowned every other sound.

Kate groped under her seat for her Orilux trench torch and fumbled for the switch. Her Movado man’s maritime watch told her they’d been aloft for half an hour, though it seemed a lifetime. She’d shoehorned a Sperry gyro-horizon between the other instruments when she tired of becoming disoriented during aerobatics. Its blue-and-black disc lurched from side to side like a drunk on a dinghy. At least they were still around two thousand feet. The other good news: three-quarters of the petrol she started with still sloshed in the tank below her.

Time lost any meaning. The world below ceased to exist. Kate and Buster flew in a great black sack, the rain and turbulence beating them with gigantic cricket bats. Her arms and shoulders screamed with the effort of holding the joystick steady. Now and then the wind gave Buster a sharp kick up his backside, slamming her head against the fairing behind the cockpit. She grew to hate the short stretches of calm—they lulled her into relaxing, then the storm took a

vicious swipe at her again. She expected the turbulence or a lightning bolt or a mountainside to erase her existence in an instant.

Before she knew it, an hour had passed since she'd left Oran.

At least the lightning had stopped. Even the rain slackened.

The Spanish coast should be close if she and Buster hadn't already passed it. The endless cloud that surrounded them masked anything on the ground. There was only one thing for it—fight their way down through the chaos until they broke through the deck. And if the clouds reached the sea? A sudden, deadly stop will tell her.

Conklin's voice echoed in her head: *tot up your options, then pick the least bad one.*

Nature chose for her. A chasm opened in the sky. Buster plummeted like a boulder, his lift gone. They careened earthward faster than they'd been going forward. She fought to escape the fall, but the air pocket stole all the control response. Luckily, she couldn't see the altimeter; the needle was likely spinning faster than the prop.

Seconds turned into hours. She was utterly terrified. She'd been in an uncontrolled spin once before and it nearly killed her. Kate couldn't stop the dive, but she had to. In the next minute, maybe two, the downdraft will crush them into the wavetops.

Wiltshire, 1918

Central Wiltshire stretched green and placid in all directions five hundred feet below her.

Kate tried to take it all in but couldn't get enough. She'd dreamed of this moment for years. Now using the Avro's wings, she could soar with the same freedom as the great birds, covering the land in huge leaps.

Swindon wheeled under the starboard wings. Lieutenant Conklin, in the cockpit ahead of

hers, pitched the trainer into a dive. Her body strained against the lap belt for a moment, then settled back into the rear-cockpit seat. The ground expanded alarmingly quickly. Flat, green rectangles became grassy fields; dark green dots turned into trees. Just when she was convinced they were about to smash into the Earth, Conklin pulled out of the dive, shoving her hard into her seat.

Kate whooped and pumped her fists in the air. *I'm flying! I'm free!*

A moment later, Dauntsey House flashed below them. A toy horse grazed in the pasture behind the manor; tiny clothes hung from drying lines outside the kitchen.

Minutes later, the Avro slid onto the dirt runway and bumped its way to its tiedown.

Back on the ground. But it didn't matter.

Kate fell head-over-heels in love. Flight had stolen her heart. She would do anything to fly again, to rise into the clouds, to feel that freedom and power once more.

And she promised herself that very, very soon, she would be at the controls.

Now

The joystick firmed in Kate's aching hand. She pushed it forward, trying to dive past the air pocket. Buster wallowed, then pitched down. Moments later, they burst through the cloud deck's bottom.

The Mediterranean boiled with phosphorescent whitecaps less than two hundred feet below.

Using the last of her strength, she leveled off at roughly three hundred feet, panting away the fear and muscle strain. It wasn't until she could lean back into her seat and unclench her death grip on the stick that she realized the rain had stopped. "Thank you, Lord," she whispered.

The horizon darkened until it became as black as the inside of the clouds. Kate wiped her goggles and shook her head clear. She was exhausted, every piece of her hurt, and her hands shook when they weren't clutching something.

The horizon grew blacker and—taller?

Cliffs!

She yanked the throttle out to the stop and buried the joystick in her stomach. The sudden downforce crushed her into her seat. Buster's nose aimed for the clouds, his engine screaming. She glanced down—actually sideways—and saw the rock face rush toward them.

Then the bluff's top edge dropped away.

Buster cleared the ridgetop trees by a few feet. A familiar carpet of twinkling lights spread inland from an octopus ink-black bay. Cartagena.

They'd reached Spain.

V. Welcome to Barcelona

After passing a beastly night “sleeping” (if it could be called that) in Buster’s cockpit at an airfield outside Cartagena, Kate and Buster touched down in mid-morning at the Los Marinos airfield southwest of Barcelona. Not before time—the needle on Buster’s petrol gauge had flirted with the “empty” line for some minutes as she scuffed along the Spanish coast, looking for landmarks.

The city airport had no proper women’s loo, so Kate had to bar herself in a workshop washroom to change into her Sunday best and try to rebuild the ruins of her hair and face. She stashed her luggage in Buster’s rear cockpit as usual and made certain his tiedowns were secure. Suitably prepared, she charmed an idling sailor into driving her to the railway station in El Prat, the small farming community next to Los Marinos.

That’s where the trouble started.

Kate had never learned Spanish. There’d been no reason; French and German were usually enough. She had to use charades to buy a third-class ticket, the only kind on offer, to the Estación de Francia in the city center. The sour-faced ticket agent barked at her for it. His barking wasn’t French, nor was it entirely like Spanish, though it sounded like both or neither depending on his volume.

The thirty-odd down-at-heels people waiting on the platform behind the stone station building gaped at Kate as they would a Hottentot in their midst. Granted, she’d never been at her best after a long flight and spotty sleep, but this level of hostility left her speechless. A

formidable older woman in black jostled Kate as she walked by. Kate had stood on this very platform with the Knights over two years before and the natives couldn't have been friendlier.

What happened? Is it the war? Do they hate foreigners now?

A careworn train with brash red flags snapping at the front of the boiler wheezed into the station after an uncomfortable twenty minutes. She climbed into a third-class carriage full of people of the land and met with a wall of undisguised hatred. Even the chickens in baskets stopped clucking.

Embarrassed and frightened, Kate fled into what would've been a second-class car on a normal train. No conductor tried to shoo her back to steerage, but the score of hostile passengers presented her with a silence colder than the air outside. She reluctantly bypassed the little boy sitting with his mother—dark-haired young lads were the last things she should think about—and instead perched on the edge of the only unoccupied bench.

An interminable few minutes after the train left the station, a male whisper reached her ear. “¿Señorita?”

Don't answer. Don't make things worse.

“¿Señorita?” More urgent now, as if it prefaced *your hair is aflame*.

Keep yourself to yourself and you might survive until you reach your station.

“Mademoiselle?”

The French startled her. She swiveled to her left and found a man leaning across the aisle toward her. A generous helping of gray salted his neatly cropped hair and short beard. No doubt he'd proposition her next; any female traveling alone who wasn't obviously a grandmother must be a tart. Kate put on her most resolute face. “Oui?”

His eyebrows arched. “*Parlez-vous français?*”

The question forced her to pay more attention to the man. She saw in his distinguished-but-not-handsome face not lust, but a gentle, almost fatherly concern. His respectable head didn't belong with his shabby clothes. He might not be about to stab her. "*Oui, bien sûr*. Are you French?"

"No, no. Catalan. I often have business across the border. Are you?"

"No, I'm English."

The man pursed his lips. "I fear the English aren't our favorite people right now."

"Whatever we've done to deserve that, I was no part of it."

"Of course not." He smiled with a collection of unusually nice teeth. "Allow me to apologize in advance. What I must say, I mean for your benefit. Your outfit is lovely, but it won't do you any favors in the city."

Esteve explained that Kate, being dressed like a lady, looked to her fellow passengers to be one of Franco's bourgeois supporters. The *Barcelonés*, the most dedicated Republicans in the Republic, wanted nothing to do with that—or her.

Kate had dressed smartly for the consulate; it was an outpost of His Majesty's Government, after all. She also wanted to look nice for seeing Charlie again after far too long. Her black wool greatcoat lay open over an azure, mid-calf dress with cap sleeves and tiny white dots, the nicest and most up-to-date day dress she still owned. Her black knit gloves and sturdy black pumps were appropriate for the season; her Panama fedora wasn't, but it was still respectable. Compared to the others in the coach, she did seem uncomfortably posh.

She considered what Esteve had said. "You're saying that these people hate me because they think I'm a fascist?" *This explains so much. But...* "What am I to do about this? I didn't bring a disguise."

Esteve advised her to leave the train at the Sants station and go to the Mercat de l'Hort Nou, a large market nearby, where she could find people selling their old clothes. "Find yourself a nice, old black dress, perhaps like one your mother wore, and put away your hat and gloves. People will think you're from the country or that you're a young widow. There are many widows now. In either event, no one will bother you."

Misjudging things so badly embarrassed Kate. She usually tried to be more careful than this. She'd glided on memories rather than sniffing the air before venturing outside her hangar.

Pay more attention, she scolded herself. You're no longer immortal.

Esteve squeezed her hand and smiled. "Your stop is just ahead. Please be careful, Catherine. There are many angry people out there, and most have guns. Bad things happen suddenly now—don't let them happen to you."



Had she survived into the 1920s, Mother might have worn the black lace dress Kate bought for a song from a market stall. Like most women's garments from the early '20s, it erased both her bosom and her waist. It had more mends than tatting. But as Esteve promised, once she slid it on, passersby paid little attention to her other than the occasional pitying glance.

Kate had visited the city in the summer of '34 with three of her mates from the flying circus after their first day's show. The Barcelona they'd seen that afternoon had teemed with grand buildings and oodles of smart shops, bars, and cafés. Autos and blue and yellow trams bustled through the streets. The *Barcelonés* crowding the pavements in their Paris and London styles could have been from any of Europe's great cities.

The wide, workaday street Kate now plodded along on her way to the consulate was nothing like that.

Bullet holes peppered some apartment blocks and office buildings; a few others had burned. Graffiti encrusted boarded-up windows. She passed a scorched church near her destination. *Why bother to burn a church?* Mounds of square cobbles ripped from the street stood here and there, ready to form barricades or ammunition. The trams and taxis were now painted red or red and black. Flags echoing the tram colors hung everywhere, most bearing an alphabet pasta of acronyms she couldn't begin to decipher.

Posters crowded whatever wasn't draped by flags. Their bright scarlets, yellows, and blues leapt at her with the same acronyms and bold-type demands to *do something!* Too bad she couldn't understand what—the little paper-cover English-Spanish dictionary she picked up at the market clearly assumed tourists wouldn't be discussing Trotskyism or whatnot.

With all that, the people still stood out. The new fashion craze for winter 1936 was evidently workers' coveralls, often blue denim, accessorized with red scarves and boots or rope-soled sandals. So sad Kate hadn't known; she could've worn her performing kit—a cadet-blue, twill boiler suit—and fit in perfectly. Women wore trousers and went hatless, sometimes displaying elaborate permanent waves. Others, like her, wore tired clothes from the last decade, all the better to fade into the background.

As Esteve had warned her, weapons were clearly *à la mode*. She hadn't seen so many rifles and shotguns in public since Papa's last pre-war grouse-hunting party. She dearly hoped the men (and women!) going about openly armed felt more secure. It gave her the collywobbles.

Confidence shone on every face. No one displayed the put-upon workingman's gloom. Nobody scuttled out of the way of their "betters" in their path. No hats were tipped, no brims touched in deference. These people were proud, even as they stood in long queues outside bakeries and butcher shops. They bowed to no one. The sight both puzzled and thrilled Kate.

A disfigured blank wall seized her attention along the way. A ragged line five or six yards long scoured the plaster to the underlying building block at roughly her chest height, flanked above and below with random bullet holes. Kate stared at it for some while. The scar resolved into a mass of individual pockmarks. Bits of dark rust flecked the gouge and the wall. All at once she understood what had happened here, and how often it had happened.

Despite the milky sunshine and moderate temperature, she shivered.

EXCERPT

VI. Talking to the Wall

Kate glanced at her Elgin for the hundredth time. *An hour gone, and no Charlie. This is no fit way to treat family.*

Her oak side chair in the far corner of the British Consulate's waiting room had become an instrument of torture. Her crossed ankles and hands felt like machines left to rust in the rain.

The mixed lot of people thronging the room reminded her of characters filling a lifeboat in a shipwreck film. They clutched papers or checked watches while looking ill or anxious or tired or combinations of the three. None seemed to notice her at all.

An impossibly young couple sat two seats away, wrapped in their newlywed glow. Their hands tangled as they waited for (she guessed) the *charge d'affaires* to supply papers so they could leave the country together. Was he the Spaniard, or was she? Kate couldn't understand the words they murmured, but she recognized the international language of billing and cooing. *Was I ever that young and starstruck? Have I always felt this old?*

"Well, the prodigal sister returns. What the devil are you doing here, Katie?"

The familiar Cambridge-polished vowels startled her from her thoughts. She popped out of the chair in delight. "Charlie! At last! I was about to call out the navy to search for you." She spread her arms to hug her brother.

"Not here. We're not Spanish." Charlie gave her a once-over scan. "You didn't wear that outside, did you? You'll end up against a wall."

Kate had changed into appropriate clothing in the downstairs loo and wasn't in any mood

to be lectured again on the subject. "Of course not. I wore a rag I picked up along the way. Properly proletarian, I assure you." The fatigue and worry creasing his face inspired her to soften her voice. "You look so tired. Are they working you too hard?"

Charlie stood a head taller than Kate, just over six feet, lanky and broad-shouldered and good-looking in a Ronald Coleman sort of way. But the dark shadows under his eyes aged him terribly, his wrinkled shirtsleeves spoke of long hours at his desk, and those strong shoulders slumped under whatever load he carried. He sighed. "There's a war on, you know."

"So I've heard." She gingerly laid her hand on his shoulder. "Let's have a sit somewhere, shall we?"

"Come on, then."

They marched down a corridor lined with dark-stained doors with frosted-glass half-panels and transoms. Men in braces and shirtsleeves briskly lugged papers and files and whatnot from office to office. Charlie nodded to them in passing.

Kate felt eyes on her as she followed him down the hallway. Admiring the cut of her dress? Her calves? Or did they know who she was and wanted a gawp at the scarlet woman? "How's Elise?" she asked, trying to sound bright. "How are the girls?"

"I had to send them home in July," Charlie grumped.

"To France?"

"No, to England. They're at Dauntsey House."

"I'm sure Papa and Sarah are pleased." Her tone suggested she didn't entirely believe that.

"Oh, they are. Sarah's missed having a woman her age to conspire with. She and Elise are in league now."

Sarah—their stepmother—was merely three years older than Charlie. “Poor Papa.”

“Not so poor. He’s over the moon that there’re children in the house again.” He cut her a hard glance. Kate allowed it to bounce off, knowing precisely what he meant. “And I’m here, surplus to requirements. Here we are.” They arrived at a door at the corridor’s end with “C. GORHAM COMMERCIAL SEC’Y” painted on the glass—a perk of his new posting. He held it open for her.

She chirped “How cozy!” as she entered. Bookshelves lined one side of the smallish room, and a rather plain wooden desk took up the other. A brown metal fan twirled listlessly under the high ceiling. Mountains of papers and files approached the framed photos of King Edward and Stanley Baldwin above them. Kate pointed toward the now-abdicated king’s face. “You do know he’s no longer—”

“Yes, yes, I know,” Charlie bristled. “We’re waiting for George’s portrait to come from London.”

Apparently, she wasn’t the first to mention it. She bent to inspect the two gold-framed snaps nestled against a paper foothill. The first she recognized in a shot: Papa and Mother standing on Dauntsey House’s main staircase, with much younger versions of Charlie and herself one step below and in front. Christmas 1918; the last time they were all together. Seeing Mother was like looking in a mirror—the same large eyes, high cheekbones, and straight-backed nose. Kate said, half to herself, “It always surprises me how much I resemble Mother now.”

“You could do worse. She was a beautiful woman.”

Beautiful overstated things. But even Kate would admit that Mother had been quite attractive—so long as one didn’t have to live with her.

The second portrait featured Charlie, Elise—a pert, doe-eyed, blond *Parisienne*—and two

absurdly adorable little girls. A pinprick stabbed her heart. She had no pictures of herself with her son Michael. She stepped back, glum. “How are the girls adjusting?”

Charlie sagged into his swiveling wooden desk chair. It objected. “You know how children are at their age. Everything’s an adventure. And there are the horses. They’d sleep in the stable if allowed.”

“That’d keep them out from underfoot.” She paced down the shelves, surveying the ranks of books, occasionally touching one that drew her attention. Beside the expected legal texts and statutes sat a truly odd collection of subjects ranging from agriculture to steel smelting. “What exactly does a commercial secretary do?”

“Remember nanny?”

“Which one?”

“Any of them.”

“Of course.”

“I do what she did, except for grown men who should know better.”

“Well, at least you have recent experience with small children.” Kate turned to face him. “Now that we won’t cause a scandal, may I hug my big brother?”

She instantly felt safe in Charlie’s arms, much as she had as a girl with Papa. She let the contact linger, then pulled back enough to look up into his face. “I’ve missed you.”

Charlie tsked and stepped away. “You’re the one who’s always gone. How long before you run off this time? A day? Two days?”

She counted to five before answering. “I’ve no engagements after this. I’m free as the proverbial bird.”

He sat again, shaking his head. “Did you get sacked?”

Kate hadn't wanted to get into this. "We all got sacked. The flying circus went on the rocks two weeks ago and shorted us a month's wages in the doing. They stopped feeding us over two months ago."

"*Quelle surprise.* It was always a short step ahead of the receivers. Why are you here? Do you want money?"

Must. Not. Fight. With Charlie. She stepped to the window, playing for time to collect herself. She looked out on a narrow, rather dirty courtyard, with a brick wall opposite. "I love the view here," she said. "It must inspire you so."

"It reminds me of dealing with Whitehall. What do you want?"

She'd used her hour of waiting to plan how to tell Charlie about her situation. Kate knew she should talk about the Messerschmitt and ask his advice. Make this about business, not family. But she desperately needed to know something important. Before she could stop herself, she blurted, "I've not gotten any post since July. Have you any news about Michael?"

Charlie snorted. "I haven't a watch on your son. That's his mother's job." His voice turned flat and hard. "The latest I know is from Sarah. She says he passed the Harrow test. Phillip bragged about it all over town."

Dear Lord. Twelve already. Kate knew that. That is, her *brain* knew it. Her heart refused, and its near-constant ache squeezed a bit harder. She thanked the stars that she still faced the window so Charlie couldn't see the grimace twisting every muscle in her face. She whispered, "I've missed his childhood."

"And whose fault is that?"

She dearly hoped the sharp edges in Charlie's voice weren't deliberate. "Mine, according to you. And the dolt's, for taking Michael away."

“You’re the one who left.” Apparently, the sharp edges were deliberate. “You’re the one who started that absurd circus of a divorce—”

“I didn’t make it that way. The dolt’s solicitor—”

“—so sordid, so public—”

“—decided to try the suit in the *Daily Mail*, not me!” She hadn’t meant to shout, but he’d prodded the rawest sore in her psyche and she needed him to stop before she flung herself out the window. “I don’t hate Phillip for nearly murdering me. It’s nothing I care to go through again, but I can’t fault him for it. He’s out of his mind with shell shock, and no one’s helped put him right. I *do* hate him for taking away my son, and for what he allowed his solicitor to do to me. To *us*.”

Charlie’s chair squawked. “Have you *any* idea what that farce was like for the rest of us? Having our lives dissected in pub—”

“Yes!” Kate spun to face him. “It happened to me, too! Have you forgot?” His stubborn-bulldog expression told her he had, or hadn’t considered it. “I’m sorry it was uncomfortable for you to deal with the public-school bullies you work with. Did you ever give a thought to what it was like for me to have the intimate details of my marriage dished out to Lord Rothermere’s drooling hordes? Having headlines call me ‘hysterical’? ‘Liar’? ‘Strumpet’?”

She hadn’t wanted a fight. Not with Charlie. She’d lost her parents, her wedded family, and her working family; she couldn’t lose Charlie, too. But he’d needle her, and she’d lose control, and they’d stumble into this same horrid quarrel. No one knows better than kin how to wound a person.

Charlie clamped his arms tight. “You should’ve accepted Phillip’s offer when you had the chance. But no. It was all about *you*. What *you* wanted. And you took all of us down with—”

“Walk away from my son?” She stalked toward Charlie, her fists clenched at her sides. “Without a fight? Would you do that? If something went horribly wrong with Elise, would you abandon the girls to escape it?”

“Of course not. Don’t be ridic—”

“But you expected me to do it to spare your feelings?” Kate growled out her frustration, then swept to the bookshelves so she didn’t have to look into Charlie’s hard eyes. “This is what hurt the most back then. My own family didn’t stand behind me. Even *Papa* didn’t stand behind me. And you!” She swiveled, thrusting an accusing finger toward Charlie. “I remember vividly when you came home for Christmas in your first term at Harrow and you told me about all the twisted, evil things the upperclassmen did to you. How you were afraid to go back. And I listened. I *supported* you. I was eleven years old, and I comforted you, because you were my brother and *I loved you*. Do you remember that?”

Charlie looked away and nodded once. “I remember.” He shot her a sideways glance. “You’ve changed.”

“So have you. That Charlie would never have turned his back on me. A real man would’ve stood up for his sister when her husband beat her nearly to—”

“A real woman”—his eyes and nostrils flared—“wouldn’t get so out of hand that she forces her husband to discipline her!”

“You! When I most needed your support and your love, you took the side of a man you don’t even know. He’s a bully and a drunk and a wastrel and a cheat...and a fascist! You know he’s a member of Mosley’s absurd pretend-Nazi party, don’t you?”

“Some fine people belong to the BUF.” Charlie’s face had turned to brick.

Kate staggered back a step. “No. Charlie, no. Tell me you’re not a member—”

“Don’t be ridiculous. I’m simply saying there are people of breeding who support Mosley.”

“‘People of breeding’? The same people who thought I should’ve been a ‘decent woman’ and let my husband cut me in pieces?” All at once, the resentment and anger deserted her, leaving her tired and sad and limp. “This was a mistake. I shouldn’t have come. Good day, Charlie.”

Kate made it halfway to the door before Charlie said “Katie” the way coppers say “Halt.” Against her better judgment, she stopped.

“Why *did* you come? What do you want?” His voice had switched from aggravated to puzzled.

She stood with her back to him while she tried to remember why she thought this was a good idea. After drawing a few deep breaths, she said as evenly as she could manage, “I’ve discovered something important. Something that may change the balance of power. I need your advice.”

Silence echoed through the room for a few seconds. Then Charlie burst out laughing. “Advice? You’ve never listened to my advice! Why do you want it now?”

Something broke inside Kate. Her face blazed with shame and rage. The money be damned; she couldn’t stay in this room any longer. She yanked the plan from her handbag, unfolded it roughly, then held it up for Charlie to see. “Here. Decipher it yourself.”

VII. Mr. Hitler's Newest Toy

Kate had charged halfway down the corridor, her heels cracking like rivet guns on the linoleum, when Charlie's voice rang behind her. "Katie! Wait!"

His colleagues in the hallway goggled at her, then him, then back to her. She hitched up her handbag strap and continued her march.

Running footsteps caught up to her. Charlie roughly grabbed her arm and swung her about. "Where did you get that?"

"Don't touch me!" Kate yanked her arm free. "Do you really want to know?"

Charlie's mouth almost said *yes* but changed at the last instant. "Lord, no. But what is it? What does it mean?"

She folded her arms and thrust up her square chin. "How should I know? I'm just a silly little girl, aren't I? I should be disciplined, shouldn't I?"

He scanned the small crowd surrounding them. "Not here," he hissed. "Come back to my office and tell me what this is about."

Kate turned her iciest stare on him.

Charlie heaved in a deep breath. "*Please.*"

She'd always won their staring contests. "Right." Her return trip to the office was as quick and loud as her escape. When Charlie closed the door behind them, Kate retrieved the plan from her handbag once again, then waved it at him. "If you insult me or talk down to me one more time, I will burn this on your desktop. Am I clear?"

The points of Charlie's jaw glowed white. "Yes. What. Is. That?"

She smoothed the three-view plan over the leather desk blotter and planted a forefinger in the sheet's middle. "This comes from a set of aeroplane plans. What do you know about Willy Messerschmitt?"

"Nothing. Who is he?"

"He's one of the bright young things of German aviation design. This is his latest project. It's likely to be the best fighter aeroplane in the world. And"—she dropped the photo onto the plan—"it's in Seville."

Charlie's eyes popped open in alarm. "Seville?" He edged closer to the desk to study the photo. "Are those Spaniards?"

"No. Germans. Apparently, some senior officers."

Charlie peered into her eyes. "Why is this important now?"

"It's Mr. Hitler's latest toy. Now that he has a sandbox the size of Spain, it appears he wants to play with it here. So much for non-intervention."

He stared at the photo. "What sort of advice do you want from me?" The heat had leached from his voice.

Careful, now. If Kate baldly asked what this information might be worth, he'd think she was bracing him for money again. If she played it too subtly, she might end up donating the plans and photo to the Crown. Neither outcome would do. She said, "These should go to someone who knows their value and will do something with them. Who do you suggest?"

Charlie shook his head. "It's not my area. I'd have to ring the Air Attaché at the embassy."

"He'd be interested?"

“I’d imagine. If not him, there may be others. Why do you ask?”

“In a very few years, I fear that my German friends will be fighting and killing my British friends and my French friends again, and that they’ll be able to do so because they’ve tested their new weapons here. Someone needs to *do* something about it, not simply file away the information in a cabinet somewhere. I want them to *value* it. That’s why I came to you. You’ll know who needs it, and you can help me get it to them.” She crossed her arms again, trying to look stronger than she felt. “I went to some trouble and expense to secure these things and I wish to be reimbursed fairly. That’s—”

“This is about money, is it?” He shook his head sadly. “Here you talk this tosh about—”

“It’s not tosh, Charlie,” she spat. “I mean every word. This needs to be seen to. Unless your contacts are out-of-pocket to some extent, they’ll never value what I give them.”

Charlie massaged a spot between his eyebrows. “It doesn’t work that way. You can’t walk in here and sell information. We’re not a pawnbroker. You have to make arrangements beforehand. Otherwise, we’d have a queue out the door.”

“But this is *important!* The balance of power in Europe—”

“Everyone thinks their information is important.” Kate hadn’t heard Charlie growl for a good long time, but he did now. “Go home. That wretched flying circus of yours is gone. Time to grow up and do something useful. Perhaps Sarah can persuade Father to take you back.”

Had he struck her, she couldn’t have been more surprised. After a long pause she used to stifle the first few remarks her anger proposed, she snapped, “I can’t go home. I would love to go home, but too many people still think the way you do. When last I was in Wiltshire, some puffed-up pigeon of a woman I’d never seen before cursed at me for ‘binning my son’ so I could ‘run off to join the circus.’ I nearly plucked and fricasseed her.” Kate adjusted her Panama hat

with more precision than required. “Please do what you can. If Whitehall isn’t interested, I may try my luck with the Élysée.” She folded and stowed the plan. “I’ll leave you the snap as a sample to show around. Now, if you’ll recommend a hotel where I can stay without becoming infested, I’ll be on my way.”

“Good luck there.” He favored her with a look usually reserved for the deranged. “The militias are using the best hotels as barracks. Between that and the refugees, any spare rooms are in places I wouldn’t keep a dog. You picked the wrong time for a Barcelona holiday.”

You sent away your wife and children. You have an empty flat. Is it too much trouble to lend me a room? She didn’t say it, but it was a near thing. “Very well, then,” Kate said in an extra-crisp voice. “I’ll kip somewhere on the aerodrome and let you know where I land. Don’t be alarmed if it’s something like ‘Hangar Three behind the oil drums.’ I’m accustomed to those sorts of accommodations.” She squared her shoulders and headed for the door.

“Oh, good Lord, Katie, let me find—”

“No, I won’t hear of it.” She waved away his words. “I’m not here to be a burden. Ring me at the aerodrome when someone wants to talk seriously about the information I’ve brought you.” Kate paused with her hand on the doorjamb. “I’ve truly missed you, Charlie. I’m sorry the feeling isn’t mutual. Good day.”



That was a disaster.

Kate trudged away from the consulate, just about able to avoid other walkers. Her head thundered with Mother’s scolding. *You silly, silly girl. You need Charlie’s help and what do you do? You argue with him instead. You never fight with the men in the family. A proper woman does what they tell her.*

Why is that, Mother? The men care only about themselves. Both Papa and Charlie were more concerned about their blasted reputations than about whether I lived. No more. It's the twentieth century. We have the vote. If they want us to listen, they need to start making sense.

The smart stone buildings on either side of the street slid by without her paying them much mind. She wasn't entirely certain where she was, not that it mattered. She headed roughly east—the sun slowly dropped into the brown factory-smokestack pall behind her—and the temperature had already started falling. Cold never fussed her much. She was English, after all; cold was her birthright. But a nasty wind blew down the street and straight up her black dress. Once again, she wished she'd worn her flying suit.

Could she trust Charlie to do what she asked? Once, depressingly long ago, there'd be no question. They were nearly inseparable as children, partly because they enjoyed each other's company, and partly because Kate made it a mission to ensure that whatever Charlie got to do, she did also. Boys always got to do the most interesting things. Proper Edwardian girls were expected to play with dolls and have pretend tea parties. None of that rot for her. She was going to be an explorer, and Captain Scott certainly didn't have tea parties at the South Pole.

But Charlie was right about one thing: they'd both changed. He largely disappeared from her life once he went off to Harrow, then Cambridge, then the Consular Service. Christmas, summer intervals, the odd stolen holiday: he'd reappear suddenly, taller and more distant, with less time or tolerance for his baby sister. He became an adult with his own family, plans, problems, and priorities. He was the first man to break her heart.

Life and time had remolded her, too. Charlie was at Cambridge when she caught the Spanish influenza and the vicar administered extreme unction. He was away when the flu took Mother, and Kate became lady of the house at the ripe age of sixteen. She became a mother

herself—the most frightening and exhilarating experience of her life—then lost her beautiful son to a man unfit to raise dogs. She loved and lost, married, lost the husband, lost her parents and home, and lived on the margins of polite society. She developed a far higher tolerance for pain (both physical and emotional) than she ever imagined she could. Charlie had missed all that. *Does he still think I'm a little girl stuffed full of dreams? He'll be surprised if he does.* Her dreams had all been beaten out of her, sometimes literally.

She stopped at a trestle table set on the curb, draped in wrinkled white muslin. A bearded man wearing a flat cap called out to passersby in the universal cadence of sales talk. Baskets wrapped in ribbons crowded the table, piled high with cured hams, cheeses, preserves, olive oil, and biscuits. Opened crates of Spanish champagne barricaded the table from the front. When Kate noticed the knobby little pine tree atop a carton on the table, she realized with a start that Christmas was but a week away.

Not that Christmas had been much of an event since 1928—her last with Michael.

Now thoroughly downcast, Kate shrugged deeper into her greatcoat and followed the largest group of people she saw, hoping they were heading for a metro or railway station to go home. Two blocks later, she emerged onto a huge plaza surrounded by tall stone buildings: the Plaça de Catalunya. She waited for a red-and-black trolley to clatter past, then hurried across the Rambla to the plaza's southernmost point. There she joined the throngs of people bustling along the broad diagonal walkways connecting the plaza's corners. It looked more like a shift change at a factory than market closing time in The City; blue boiler suits, smocks, and boots were everywhere.

The rushing reminded her that for the first time in years, she had nowhere to go and no deadline to get there. Some people called that freedom. For her, forward motion equaled

survival—stopping meant having time to think, a rarely pleasant and often unhealthy activity.

The metro station burrowed under the Praça's north end. She came within steps of entering when Mother said, *Do you know where you're going, or are you simply moving?*

Kate perched on a ledge outside a fountain's spraying range to work out the problem. She should go to the airfield and rescue her luggage. But then what? Despite her brave words to Charlie, she wasn't keen to curl up on a cold concrete hangar floor. Leaving the city meant leaving any chance of finding a bed of her own.

Perhaps Charlie had a point.

Listen to Charlie, Mother urged. Go home.

I haven't a home to go to, Mother. Dauntsey Park will always be home, and it's out of reach. Papa made that clear when he turfed me out. I can't go home until I've made things right. I've no notion how to do that.

She'd hoped that being cold and uncomfortable would inspire her brain to come up with a plan, even a bad one. Instead, inertia set in. People passed by in a blur. Her ankles grew numb, a regular winter problem; she should've looked for thicker stockings at the market. Kate *could* survey the hotels for an empty room. But all the hotels she saw were draped with red political banners and swarmed by armed guards. Charlie gained nothing by lying about there being no room at the inn. She might waste the afternoon and end up back here no better off.

Dash it. She knew her way around an aerodrome. If she left now, she could be at Los Marinos well before dark. *I may still freeze tonight...but at least someone will find my body by morning.*