The Bluejay's Gambit

The Kate DeWitt Adventures #1

A novel by

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Excerpt

1. Anything Goes

Oran, 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 set. Applause was her drug. Forget cocaine, forget Champagne; an adoring audience could send her soaring as high as her aerobatic 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 Kate 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—

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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—uncomfortably close in size to a prison cell—lurched and squealed upward.

A familiar, scolding voice—one that sounded suspiciously like her dead Mother's—screamed in her mind. *Leave! Leave now, before you're ruined.*

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But she couldn't. She needed this. Michael needed his mother.

The voice screeched, *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 bit 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."

The voice 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. Rupert's voice returned from her past: *You can't force it open, girl. You have to tickle it.* Seduce *it*. He'd flown with the Knights as a way to avoid a British warrant for burglary. It had amused him to "corrupt" her. She'd never let on how corrupt she already was.

She didn't need the pin or Rupert. 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…*

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11. Scene of the Crime

Two mornings before

A handsome young Spanish lieutenant appeared at Kate's hotel-room door with an invitation from 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."

This colonel apparently considered her a pilot, not a singing tart. How refreshing! 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 twittery 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). Such 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 rebel heroism and gallantry in defending the Alcázar against the government's troops. The garrison ladies cooed their congratulations.

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Kate recalled the stories in the French and British papers: 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. *The fascist world*, Kate grumbled inwardly, disgusted. *Men ruling by force and fear and death, propped up by adoring, useless women*. Her stomach heaved.

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 quickly surveyed the colonel's bedroom and *en suite*. Both were predictably grand and usefully uninhabited.

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She crossed through the parlor again, then tiptoed into the colonel's makeshift office. 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.

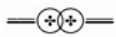
The plans could be as valuable as diamonds to the right buyer. At least, so she hoped.

Kate selected a sheet with a dimensioned 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 cramp 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

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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 next to the sofa and put on a concerned smile. "You have returned to us."

She took a moment to herd her straying thoughts together. 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—*police?*—leaked from his makeshift office. "What…what happened?"

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

She 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 engage. They all ached, but they seemed to work given enough urging. "Your door was ajar. You didn't answer my knock. I became concerned. I noticed the light in your office. I went in 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." For once she could tell the truth. "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?*

"Do not apologize." He squeezed her hand. "I am 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?"

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"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 are 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.

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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 could wait until morning, then leave like any innocent, respectable person: rested, fed, and at her leisure.

But.

How long had 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? *A woman in a white dress was there. 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. She needed to be long gone when the coppers started calling her a suspect rather than a victim. That one night she'd spent in an Algerian jail cell was one too many. 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 plans and the photo in the false bottom, removed what remained of her cash, then refilled it with folded clothes. Then she donned a black greatcoat over a long-sleeved white blouse, high-waisted navy-blue trousers, and ankle-high brown-leather boots.

Once on the ground floor, she slipped behind a potted palm to survey the lobby, alive with guests and gendarmes. Did the coppers pay close attention to youngish, dark-haired women? None she could see.

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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 nearby port's stink. Clouds hid every star in the sky behind black tapioca. She set down her luggage for a moment and scanned 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. *Having a gawk? Sizing me up for leg irons?* Just in case, she turned away to peer into her chrome-and-enamel Art Deco compact.

Three more gendarmes stepped outside 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. No self-respecting driver will stop for a woman riding alone.

Kate steeled herself to re-enter the lobby and ask for help, though it would call attention to her abrupt departure. She 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 she 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 north 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

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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 seemed sensible that the aircraft plan hiding in her valise was worth something to only a relatively small circle of 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 dawn of creation.

Is this all 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 her. Kate had no way to tell if the cars belonged to the gendarmes or the army. They showed

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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 wouldn'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 wouldn'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 northern sky's angry, impenetrable blackness. 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 blue stripes wrapped around his wings and the fuselage didn't have chips and worn spots. The poor beast needed an overhaul and new paint—another expense that would shove seeing her son

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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, warmth won out over style every time.

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 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.*

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."

Shaking his head, the man wrestled on an already-sodden hooded yellow poncho, then plodded toward the open door.

Cones of watery light near the airfield's main gate knifed through the rain. 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.

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.

The Arab 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

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engine rumbled to life.

The headlamps drew closer.

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. She 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. The Arab stood by with the rope for the wheel chocks firmly in hand. "Thank you!" 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.

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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.

A bitter laugh leapt from her mouth. *Not quite the romance of flying I'd planned. Mother must be laughing at me from Hell.*

Wiltshire, 1916

Kate was born in 1903, the same year as powered flight.

When she was a girl, aviators were the epitome of exploration and adventure. She devoured 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 to set up a training airfield on his land north of Langley Burrell. She thrilled at the news; there'd be a real, live aerodrome within an easy ride from home!

Once the field opened in September, she rode her Welsh Cob mare Trudy 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, seemingly just beyond her reach. Avro 504 trainers turned lazy circles around the sky while she pictured herself at their 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 summer 1917, it wasn't enough to watch from the sidelines any

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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 back to the present. Some great atmospheric 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 ages had passed.

She shook out her shoulders as best she could while strapped into her seat. Impenetrably black sky wrapped all around. 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

Excerpt

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 sense the men's eyes following 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 aircraft? 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. It blinded her for a moment. 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 men'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

Excerpt

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 had lost all meaning. 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. There was only one thing for it—fight their way down through the chaos until they broke through the deck and she could see where they were. And if the clouds reached the sea? A sudden, deadly stop would 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. They careened earthward faster than they'd been going forward. She fought to escape the fall, but the air pocket stole all Buster's lift. Luckily, she couldn't see the altimeter; the needle was likely spinning faster than the prop.

Seconds turned into hours. Terror gnawed her insides. She'd experienced 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 would 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

Excerpt

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

Excerpt

part 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.

Excerpt

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 in a language that 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. *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. They met her with a wall of undisguised hatred. Even the chickens in baskets stopped clucking.

Excerpt

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. A 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 *Barcelonès*, 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

Excerpt

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 appear uncomfortably posh.

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 teemed with grand buildings and oodles of smart shops, bars, and cafés. Autos and blue and yellow trams bustled through the streets. The *Barcelonès* 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.

Some apartment blocks and office buildings stood peppered with bullet holes; others had burned. Graffiti encrusted boarded-up windows. She

Excerpt

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!* Pity she couldn't understand what—the little paper-cover English-Spanish dictionary she picked up at the market assumed tourists wouldn't be discussing Trotskyism or whatnot.

Yet the people 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. 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 going about openly armed made them all feel 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.

And the *women*. Hatless, sometimes displaying elaborate permanent waves, wearing trousers or overalls. Rifles slung over their shoulders as easily as handbags. Marching with a purpose she'd rarely seen in Britain since the suffragettes. Smiling, laughing, heads held high. They weren't some man's appendage; they were comrades. Kate thrilled at the sight.

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. The

Excerpt

same attitudes that had given her husband a wink and a nod while he beat her nearly to death allowed men and women to be shot against a wall for their ideas.

Despite the milky sunshine and moderate temperature, she shivered.

Excerpt

The bee's knees?

Your cup of tea?

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About the Author

LW Charnes has dived the Great Barrier Reef, rappelled out of a helicopter, flown a jet trainer, and driven a NASCAR racer. This came after training to be a Renaissance noble by learning how to use a sword and pistol, sit a horse, and dance. Absolutely none of this was useful in writing the Kate DeWitt Adventures historical intrigue/mystery series. Write what you know, indeed.

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