

I. Rendezvous Interrupted

March 1937

Penhill airfield, Upper Stratton, Gloucestershire

Wish I didn't leave things the way I did in Leeds, Frank Conklin brooded in the dark. Unfinished, fragile. A stiff wind could shred it all. He hadn't wanted to leave—not after finally finding her after so many wasted years—but he'd learned long ago to not stay at a party when he's told to go. Especially when the one telling likes to hurt people.

The red glow of his cigarette tip was briefly the brightest thing on the deserted Penhill aerodrome, a glorified pasture beyond the northern edge of Swindon with a limp windsock and a creaking barn pretending to be a hangar. Only the two aircraft resting outside showed this place was more than a farmer's afterthought.

Conklin checked his watch. His contact was supposed to be waiting here half an hour ago, when Frank landed the peeling gray de Havilland Dragon now crouched over its landing gear a dozen yards away. Frank had searched in and around the hangar, but a browsing deer was the only other visible mammal on the property.

He needed to warn his contact that bad things were about to happen—the kind of bad that leaves bodies on the ground and grieving widows and kids in church pews, cursing God. He owed his minders the warning for taking a chance on him when nobody else would. Letting him show that he's not quite yet washed up.

“Waiting for someone?” a familiar voice grated behind him.

2 • The Bluejay of Mullingar / Charnes

Frank turned to find a familiar face in the hangar's gloom. The man seemed as home in the dark as a bat. "Just some business." The less Frank told him, the better for everyone.

"That so? With the filth, is it?"

"Nah, not the coppers." Technically true, but not in a more general sense. "Need to settle up a debt. I don't run out on my obligations. What're you doing here?"

The man smiled. The first thing Frank noticed when he met this sharp-faced blond bastard was that the man had right good teeth for a gutter rat and thug. "She wants me to see you off. Make sure you really go. Make sure you don't tell nobody what you know."

"I know when I'm not wanted." Frank shrugged. "I'll start over someplace else. I won't bother her no more."

"Ain't her you gotta worry about." The man drew and cocked his .38 Webley revolver, then aimed it at Frank's forehead. "It's me."

II. A Legal Challenge

April 1937
The Square Mile, London

The little boy stared straight ahead. His father's square mouth and jaw mixed uneasily with his mother's dark eyes, high cheekbones, and upturned nose. A worry wrinkle separated his eyebrows. His knitted jumper—hardly two months old—strained against his relentlessly growing body.

His mother longed to stroke his flyaway dark hair, to let him know it would all be right. But it wouldn't be all right. She'd spent her last few shillings on this moment. Time was running out. Soon, all she'd have would be this—

“Mr. Sutherland will see you now, Lady DeWitt.”

Catherine DeWitt startled out of her past. The photograph she clutched was her only concrete proof that she'd ever had a son. She knew every line, every shadow on it. She could still smell the antiseptic on the stage and the damp in the little studio, feel the scratchy wool of Michael's tiny trousers. Hear his voice: Mummy? Can we go home?

“Lady DeWitt?”

She glanced toward the young clerk rounding the reception desk, then back to the photo. “Soon, my darling,” she whispered, then kissed the little face and carefully tucked her son's image into her handbag. Then she stood and smoothed her azure suit jacket and matching calf-length skirt.

Denton Sutherland & Ives had been in practice for nearly a century and hadn't redecorated once. The firm's reception room—a symphony of dark, polished wood, tall windows, and checkerboard floor tile—was quiet, warm, and, like most things having to do with the law, stuffy. The clerk should've been wearing a starched standing collar and cravat instead of his nondescript single-breasted suit coat and repp tie.

Kate blinked rapidly to clear her eyes, then aimed her best smile at the young man now striding her way. "Thank you. Might I trouble you for tea? As strong as you can make it. If it can walk into the office on its own, it may be strong enough."

The clerk incompletely stifled a smile. "Of course, mum. I'll bring it presently." He ushered her through a dark-stained oak door—"Victor Sutherland, Esq." in gilt Roman letters at eye level—then gently closed it behind her.

She took stock of the pattern-book legal office. A dark wood desk, dark wood shelves groaning under dark leather-backed volumes, a dark wood credenza, and two dark wood armchairs before the desk. Twilight draped the corners even at two in the afternoon.

Victor Sutherland himself wasn't made of wood—at least, not obviously—but his thinning brown hair matched his desk admirably and his black suit did nothing to brighten the room. He rose and bowed his head. "Good afternoon, Lady DeWitt. It's a pleasure to meet you finally after all our correspondence." A shame he wasn't a barrister—his hearty baritone voice was made for arguing cases in a courtroom, not for being locked up in an office churning out paper.

"Indeed." She firmly shook his offered hand, then settled in the designated seat.

He sat, adjusting his cuffs. "I trust your journey here from Lisbon was agreeable?"

Kate winced. "We sailed straight into a storm on the first day. The boat bucked and

reared like a saddle-shy horse. I fear I didn't manage much sleep." Not to mention having stayed awake for much of the night before her voyage while trying to keep up with the inexhaustible energy reserves of her much-younger hosts.

"Oh, I'm so sorry." Sutherland's distinguished face reflected the appropriate amount of sympathy. "We caught the edge of that storm on Saturday night. It gave the streets a good washing-down. And today we have a lovely day for your visit." He raised a finger. "Would you care for some tea?"

"I already put in my order with the young man, thank you." She cleared her throat. "You received my file from Mr. Clarkston?"

"Yes, I did." He patted an alarmingly thick file on his leather desk blotter. "He was quite prompt to send it when I asked."

Probably glad to be shut of me. "So you're familiar with my situation."

The clerk slipped into the room balancing a polished silver tea tray. Kate took the offered china cup and saucer holding tea as dark as overused motor oil. The young man handed his supervisor a cup generously diluted with milk.

When his minion left the room, Sutherland said, "Yes, I've been reviewing it as I've had time. It's been quite a journey for you, hasn't it?"

Eight years. Little wonder the file was heavy enough to stun an ox. "That's certainly an understatement." She took an exploratory sip from her cup. Her eyes bolted wide. An aeroplane engine could run on this. Topping! "My case?"

"Yes, of course." He leaned back into his swivel chair and blew out a long breath. Never a good sign. "You've been at bat twice—once in '30, once in '34—and were bowled both times. However, things are changing in this country. You may not have heard since you've been so long

on the Continent, but Mr. Herbert may finally get a hearing in Commons for his new Matrimonial Causes Act next month. It expands the grounds for divorce and makes them available to both sides. It's not retrospective, so unfortunately for you it won't directly apply, but it does show the direction we're headed." Sutherland lingered over a sip of tea. "I'd like to confirm one issue: you're not suing for custody, correct?"

Custody. Become a mother again. For the longest time, she'd lived on hopes—fantasies—of getting her son Michael away from his father. Time and experience had well and truly smashed those dreams, along with many others. Kate examined her onyx-black tea for a different answer from the right one. "Correct," she finally murmured. "I know better now. No court in this country would ever consider taking away a titled man's heir, no matter how disturbed he is."

"Quite so."

"It's just..." She sucked in a deep breath to steady her voice. "I need to see my son again. I need to hold him, to speak to him. I need to take him for sweets." Kate dared to look up into Sutherland's vaguely frowning eyes. "He needs a mother. At the very least, he needs a grown woman in his life. Someone who loves him. Someone who won't...who he doesn't need to consider a minefield." She set aside her cup and saucer, then braced her palms on her knees. "I can't wait until he's a man. He may not remember me; he certainly won't recognize me. Can you help? Will you?"

Sutherland leaned back with a sigh. "There are complications—"

"What sort of 'complications'?" She couldn't bear to hear that word yet again. "I have money. Mr. Clarkston told me last time that I needed five hundred pounds so we'd be prepared to deal with whatever foolishness Phillip's solicitors threw at us. I have it, and I'll gladly spend

every farthing if you can break that triple-blasted writ Phillip bought to keep me away from my son. I want my visitation rights! The court gave them to me, and Phillip decided to take them away.” She realized how loud her voice had become. “Sorry. It’s a sensitive topic. I get...vexed.”

“I should hope.” He let out a sniff that could be the start of a chuckle. “Please save that passion for the courtroom. Money isn’t the difficulty, Lady DeWitt. It’s—”

“Please call me ‘Kate.’”

He cleared his throat authoritatively. “Lady DeWitt. I know you and Mr. Clarkston were on friendly terms. That’s his way. I don’t address my clients using their Christian names. It’s not conducive to maintaining a businesslike relationship.” He pulled a leather-bound notebook closer, uncapped an impressive, gilded fountain pen, then wrote the date in fine copperplate script on the top of the page. “How long were you on the Continent this last time?”

Is this a complication? “I beg your pardon. How is this pertinent?”

“I’m contributing to your education. I could simply tell you all this, but Mr. Clarkston informed me that you learn best when you teach yourself. Assume you’re in the box and your husband’s bar—”

“Former husband.”

“My apologies. Former husband’s barrister is questioning you.”

“I should stand, then.” Kate pushed herself upright, then held up her right hand as if taking an oath.

Sutherland said, “As you wish. How long have you been outside Britain?”

“Well...a year.”

“Are you normally away that long?”

“No. The Knights of the Sky show schedule ran from April to November. They went bust at the end of November last.”

“What is the Knights of the Sky?”

I told him all this in my letters. Why...? “It was a flying circus. We toured Europe and parts of North Africa.”

“What was your position there?”

“Aerobaticist. I flew aerobatics.”

“You were a performer.” He pronounced it harlot.

“Yes. Yes, I was.”

“When your flying circus failed, you came home straightaway, did you?”

“I meant to, but I fell into some government work instead.”

“And what was the nature of this work?”

“I’m afraid I can’t discuss it. I had to sign a bale of papers swearing I’d never tell a living soul. If I do, they’ll toss me in the Tower, then send me to the headsman.”

“Are you still employed by the government?”

What is he playing at? “Not presently. I understand it’s ‘as needed.’”

“I see. Do you have an income?”

“I haven’t any family money, if that’s what you mean. I have to work for it.”

“And what is your occupation?”

“Why are you asking? You know—”

“Please answer the question. Are you employed?”

Kate began to pace about the room with her hands clasped behind her back. “Yes. I’m a flying instructor. I teach women, mostly, how to fly aeroplanes.”

“And how many students have you at this time?”

Kate started to see the dim outlines of his point. “None presently. I’ll have to beat the bushes for more. I can usually find them.”

“No doubt.” Sutherland inspected her for a few moments. “Where do you live, Lady DeWitt?”

“Outside Oxford. A quiet little place called Stanton St. John.” True, in a general way.

“But where exactly do you live? I remind you that you’re under oath.”

Suddenly, all is clear. “My aerodrome has a hangar. There’s a room in the back that I use for my bedroom. It’s not as bad as it sounds.” It’s worse.

Sutherland leaned back into his chair, arms folded, and watched her avoid his gaze. He finally said, “Did you learn anything from our exchange, Lady DeWitt?”

Yes—you’re not going to help. “Certainly. You’ve missed your calling as a barrister.”

“Anything else?”

One of the advantages of constant forward movement was that it prevented potentially unpleasant introspection. The solicitor’s inventory of Kate’s failings was like a series of taps on her head with a hammer: no one impact was damaging, but as a whole it caused quite a headache. “I’m skating on rather thin ice.”

“Indeed.” Sutherland scratched in his notebook. “Had this been actual testimony, you’d have told the judge that you’ve been a theatrical performer, you’ve spent eight months out of twelve away from England, you have no income, no prospects, and you live in a barn. Did I miss anything?”

“It’s a hangar, not a barn.”

“The practical difference is...?”

She stared at the tiled fireplace surround, wishing she could wish away the truth of her situation. “Less hay, more motor oil?”

This time he did chuckle. “If I may say so, Lady DeWitt, you’re a vivid, intelligent woman. I can see that in your letters, and in your testimony during your divorce trial.”

“I hear a ‘however’ approaching.”

“Yes. However. No court in the British Isles will see you as a responsible adult or the stuff from which a good mother is made.”

Kate winced. “You don’t mince words.”

“I try not to. It’s a disservice to my clients and myself.” He peered at her intently.

I knew this was too easy. She counted the tesserae in the mantelpiece mosaic until she could coax her voice out of hiding. “You won’t help.”

“I didn’t say that.”

Kate snapped her eyes to meet Sutherland’s.

“What I won’t do,” he continued, “is run to the High Court this afternoon to file a motion to vacate your hus—your former husband’s writ. If I do, Viscount DeWitt’s barrister will call you into the box and ask you exactly these same questions. I know Mr. Biggs—he’s a piece of work, but he gets results. He’ll make certain you’re humiliated before the motion’s dismissed. I will not have that for a client of mine.”

Kate shook her head to clear it, or perhaps to rattle his words into order. “Wait—does that mean you’ll take me on?”

“It does. I’ll accept fifty pounds as a retainer, on two conditions. One is that you’ll listen to me. That is, after all, why you’re paying me—because I know things you don’t. Second, that you’ll do as I say.”

Normally, she'd consider such a suggestion to be typical male impertinence. Sutherland's tone told her he wasn't having her on. "What exactly do you expect me to do?"

"Change your life."

It took a few seconds for this to tickle her brain enough to cause her to burst out laughing. "Oh, is that all? Perhaps I can start by growing taller, or younger, or prettier. It'll be a doddle."

Sutherland's focus remained fixed on her eyes. It occurred to her too late that, being a solicitor, he might not appreciate humor, far less sarcasm. "I'm quite serious," he finally replied. "The only way you'll enter a courtroom as my client is if you're ready to win. You're not now."

"What does 'ready to win' mean?"

"In this case, three things." He rose, then held up a finger. "Stay in England longer than four months." He raised a second finger. "Find some students. Ten or twelve is a good start. Make ready to show a court that you have an income." A third finger appeared. "Buy a house."

"A house? That's absurd!"

"I didn't tell you to buy a manor. A cottage would do, one you own. A proper home you could invite your son to visit and not be ashamed. This will show the court that you have property and that you're steady. I can't emphasize steady enough. You'll never see your son again unless you can convince the court that you can be a proper mother, and that means steady."

A flash of anger warmed her ears. "You mean to say that Phillip can be a father even when he's out of his mind from shell shock, but I have to be a paragon before I'm fit to be in the same room as my son?"

"That's exactly the situation. No one ever claimed English law to be fair."

"Actually, lots of people do, but they're usually on the winning side. How long do I have for this project?"

“How much longer can you stand to be separated from your boy?”

Change my life. Kate worried at the tassel on an ancient rug with the toe of her pump. It’s already changed so much. Flying circuses are gone. I lost my aeroplane. What did Charlie say December last? ‘It’s time to grow up’?”

And long past time it is, too, said the nasty little voice inside her that sounded exactly like her long-dead mother. If you’d listened to me, you’d have done this years ago.

If I’d listened to you, I’d have stayed with Phillip and he’d have killed me by now.
Unintentionally, perhaps, but I’d still be dead.

“Lady DeWitt?”

Sutherland stood near the chair she’d abandoned. His left hand clutched a well-polished black cane, and his stance favored his left leg. Kate noted the crow’s feet at the corners of his eyes. In his forties? Early fifties? He might have left a bit of himself behind on some muddy Great War battlefield. Perhaps he understood Phillip better than she did.

“I’ll do what I can to help you,” he said, his voice gentling. “But the main work is yours. At least you’ve a goal to strive for.” He took an uneven step forward, swinging his left leg instead of walking with it. “You know my conditions. The decision is yours.” He held out his right hand for a shake. “Do you wish to win?”

III. Home, But Not

Reading, England

Kate stood outside the main door to the Knights of the Air business offices on the second floor of an uninspiring brick building on Cross Street in Reading. A notice pasted to the obscure glass window warned her not to enter on pain of legal consequences, fines, and so on, unless granted entry by Jos. B. Simmons, Receiver and Manager.

Sorry, Mr. Simmons. My post is in there, and you're not.

She picked the lock and slipped inside unobserved to discover a frozen moment of time. Wall calendars hung open to November 1936; teacups rested on desktops; clock hands stood unmoving. A skeletal rose drooped out of a small crystal vase on the reception desk. Dust and neglect filled her nostrils. The only time she'd been here—in January 1931—the place had been a blur of frantic activity and a Babel of voices. Now it was simply a tomb for a dead business and crushed dreams.

Multiple oilcloth Royal Mail sacks took up much of a storage closet. As the flying circus slowly spun into insolvency, it cut costs every way possible—including by no longer flying the employees' post to them as they toured the continent. Kate hadn't received a letter from the previous June until the beginning of April, when she'd settled temporarily in Lisbon.

Kate spilled the mailbags' contents on a conference table filling a dim room lined with blackboards and maps planning the aborted 1937 show season. Of course, nothing happened when she pushed the light switch, just as nothing came out when she opened the kitchen tap. No

matter. I want my past back. Luckily, she'd filled her aluminum Thermos with tea at the hotel and nestled a paper-wrapped sandwich in her handbag.

Settling into the unnatural silence, Kate sorted the post using half her brain while the rest pictured the people each piece evoked. Almost six years of her life now existed only as scrawled names on yellowing envelopes and dust on empty chairs at empty tables. At times she had to stop to dab at her eyes or stare at phantom faces at the window. All these friends and comrades now scattered across half the globe, never again to share with her a drink or a grumble or an adventure.

Hours later, after a melancholy lunch in the office rarely occupied by Mo, the Knights' impresario and perpetual motion machine, she placed the final letter on the final pile. Before her sat a stack of ten months of post from the few people who still wrote to her. Thankfully, it wasn't the shortest pile on the table. But as the only material proof of half a decade of her existence, it was a poor showing indeed.



The Great Western train from Reading to Oxford gently rocked Kate in her third-class compartment. The late hour left her blessedly alone with plenty of room in the overhead nets for her two suitcases, overnight case, and valise. Nearly everything she owned rode with her tonight. Thank the Lord for porters and small change.

She tore through her stack of post, musty and sorted by cancellation date, guzzling the news of family and home—her real home—as if she'd been stranded on a deserted, drifting hulk that never found a harbor until the day it sank.

Sarah, her stepmother, recounted her exertions trying one scheme after another to keep Dauntsey Park's figurative nose above water. An entire hunting party rented rooms for a long

weekend! she wrote in October. Charles is cross, as usual, but the money will put new slate on the stable roof just in time for the rains. Kate pictured Papa grumping about a house temporarily not his own, then being persuaded to act as a guide for a troop of city people come to darkest Wiltshire for a country spree.

Allenby passed last night, Sarah jotted in a short note at the beginning of November. Kate's heart winced; Allenby was Papa's favorite German shorthaired pointer. Knowing how her father felt about his hunting dogs, the now-departed hound was her much younger brother. I found Charles this morning sitting on the floor, cradling the poor beast in his arms, weeping. There was nothing for it; all I could do was sit with him and comfort him until it was time to bury the dog under the oak on the south lawn.

Kate gazed out the window at the deepening twilight. Silhouetted trees whipped past. She found herself envying a dead dog.

Your father wouldn't weep for you if you fetched up dead, Mother sneered. You made certain of that. I doubt he'd even allow you to be buried with the animals.

Thank you, Mother. You can go back home to Hell now. It's late for you.

Kate folded the note, replaced it in its envelope, then set it face-down on the pile of letters she'd read already. She took up one she'd set aside, dated August. She loved the letters from Mrs. Forsyth, her former governess and now Chippenham's librarian; they were light and breezy as a spring shower, full of random observations of life in the only town near Dauntsey that had grown appreciably since the Domesday Book went to the scribes.

I saw Michael and his father in town yesterday.

Michael's growing so fast! He seemed in good spirits.

I happened to follow them a short way—purely by

happenstance, of course—until they turned into Mr.

Maslen's confectionary on the High Street.

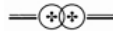
I hesitate to tell you, but you were married to the man once, so here we go: Phillip looks awful. He's jaundiced and he has more difficulty walking, even with a stick. It's sad, really—I remember him from before the war, when he was so healthy and vital, so much of the future. I know what he did to you and I can't forgive him for it, but I do hope you can spare a prayer for him now and then.

Michael's alive and well and growing. The news gladdened Kate; his father hadn't accidentally injured her son, or worse. But the happy white clouds had a dark lining—the little boy in her photograph would soon be a young man, and she'd had no part in most of his life.

And Phillip's doing poorly. With what he'd put her through, she should be glad for it, but couldn't be. She'd loved him once. She still cared for him in a way. He hadn't asked to live the horror that had damaged his body and mind in France in 1918. But she bore the scars—inside and outside—from what that horror had done to them both. She had no more prayers to spend on the man.

The train's whistle bellowed and the buildings lining the track gradually slowed to a walk. Kate had penetrated Oxford without noticing. She wedged her letters into her valise, dragged the suitcases down from the nets, then stood waiting for the final jolt of the carriage to announce their arrival. All the station lights blazed against the encroaching dark.

It's not home. But I can't go home. So here will have to do.



After a day settling in at Stanton St. John aerodrome, Kate felt as if she'd never left.

She'd departed for the Knights' farewell tour almost exactly a year before, when the grass was lush and flowers bloomed in the hedgerows, just as they did now. Jasper—the airfield's manager and resident mechanic—greeted her with his usual “Morning, Miss” as if she'd been away for a day trip to London. The semi-derelict de Havilland Cirrus Moth still sagged near the weathered wood hangar. She could still stand on the rolling ladder frame and spy the spires and domes of Oxford three miles to the southwest.

The only differences: She had no students. Kate had seen the last one through her “A” license exam a year ago, three days before she had to join the Knights in France. And she had no Buster. She still mourned the loss of the sturdy, reliable Martinsyde Buzzard she'd flown for years across tens of thousands of miles of Europe and North Africa and flogged through hundreds of aerobatic performances. A pair of Francisco Franco's pilots shot Buster and Kate out of the sky January last, destroying the ship and nearly roasting the pilot. She feared she would never again have such a faithful airplane.

Which was why on this unseasonably warm morning she was draped over the Moth's open cowling, trying to help Jasper continue the endless project of overhauling the airplane's sclerotic Cirrus II engine one replacement part at a time. Most of her weight rested on the exhaust pipe that ran across her ribs. “Get...that...thing...bolted...down!” she gasped. “Can't...bloody...breathe!”

“No need for that kind of talk, Miss,” Jasper said, predictably unperturbed. She could burn down the hangar in a fit of pique, and he wouldn't twitch an eyebrow. He placidly turned the seemingly hundreds of bolts attaching the newly-rebuilt carburetor to the engine block, taking extra care to not crimp the gasket or cross-thread a bolt. All laudable goals except when stars clouded Kate's vision.

A male voice called out a few yards behind her. "Sorry! Is Catherine DeWitt here?"

Charlie?

Jasper drawled, "Sorry, sir. There's no one by that name here."

"Jasper!" Kate grunted. "Hold the carburetor!"

The voice, now puzzled, said, "This is the Stanton St. John aerodrome, isn't it?"

"Yes, sir," Jasper answered, still placidly tightening bolts just so, "but there's no one here with that name."

"Jasper! Stop!" Kate let go of the carburetor, hoping Jasper had lashed it to the engine well enough to stave off disaster. The first full lungful of air she managed when she straightened was like breathing pure oxygen out of a bottle. She turned on the ladder's top rung and smiled down at the familiar figure. "Charlie!"

Her brother stood perhaps twenty feet away, tall and lean and handsome, with Papa's long, straight nose and square chin and Mother's dark hair. His tobacco-brown, single-breasted suit fit him just so. Charlie peered at her. "Katie?"

"Miss?" Jasper's voice was now as confused as Charlie's.

Kate raised a finger in Jasper's general direction and murmured, "I'll explain later." She descended the ladder and trotted across the grass toward Charlie, wiping her hands on the gray boiler-suit sleeves tied around her midsection. "What are you doing here?" she asked. "I mean, welcome to my aerodrome, but why aren't you in your consulate in Barcelona?" She stopped a pace from Charlie and opened her arms for a hug.

He raised a hand palm-outward—stop—then swept it up and down over her. She realized just how filthy her tattered singlet and boiler suit had become and let her arms drop. Charlie then rubbed the pad of his thumb across the tip of her nose, then showed her the blob of grease he'd

removed. He pointed toward Jasper. “Why doesn’t he know your name?”

“Because when I’m here, I’m Victoria Gorham. Vicky, if you will. She’s nothing near as notorious as that Catherine DeWitt person.” She put on a bright smile, turned back toward Jasper, and waved cheerfully.

“Why didn’t I know about this?”

She faced Charlie again. “Why did you need to know? You never come to visit.”

He took a deep breath and folded his arms, his signal that the end of his patience was within sight. “I imagine this explains your hair.”

She reflexively fingered the fringe of her jaw-length, marcelled bob. “Of course. This is how Vicky wears her hair. I had it cut in London after I saw my solicitor. It’s surprising how much a difference it makes. Now—why aren’t you in Barcelona?”

“I’ve been recalled for consultations.”

“Oh.” Kate winced. “Is the Consular Service unhappy with you?”

“No. It’s my other employer, if you get my meaning, and they’re quite pleased with me. With us, in fact.” He glanced in Jasper’s direction, then back to Kate. “Are you familiar with Thames House in London?”

“No. Should I be?”

“Yes, and by this afternoon, you will be. There’s a man there who wants a word with you. So, if you can make yourself presentable, we can leave straightaway.”

Kate surveyed the grease and oil stains on her hands and arms, imagined how many had transferred to her face, and sighed. “I’ll need to bathe. It may take a while. Do I need a dress to be ‘presentable,’ or may I wear trousers?”

“A dress, please. We’re going to London.”

“Trousers make them swoon?” Kate folded her arms and gave him an arch look. “And here I thought London people were sophisticated and open-minded. They’re no better than the Spaniards in Seville.”

Charlie scowled.

“Right. Do keep Jasper company while I transform myself back into a lady.” She turned toward the hangar, then looked back over her shoulder. “I’m glad you’re here. You finally get to see me in my world. And now you’ve no excuse for not coming back. See you soon.”

IV. Bluejay Goes to Thames House

Thames House, Millbank, London

Kate didn't know if the black-suited young man who'd escorted her and Charlie into the lift should be trusted with even an innocent question. She leaned against Charlie's shoulder so she could whisper in his ear. "This agency we're visiting—do they occupy this whole building? It's enormous."

"No," he whispered back, his breath warm on her ear. "Most of it belongs to International Nickel and Imperial Chemical Industries. The agency's on the seventh floor. The attic."

The young man escorted them through a tangle of marble-tiled corridors to a nondescript meeting room behind an anonymous door. Kate settled in one of the padded armchairs surrounding the walnut table and deposited her gloves in her upturned black felt fedora on the table. "This is underwhelming," she commented, waving her hand around the room's plain, white walls.

Charlie leaned back into his chair. "You'll find that most government agencies don't have the budgets for grand furniture."

A minute later, a man wearing a well-cut charcoal three-piece suit swept in with a file folder clamped under his arm. He beamed at Charlie and thrust out his right hand. "Charlie, old dog. Always good to see you."

"Good to see you too, Sam. You look fine." Charlie sprang from his chair and pumped Sam's hand. He swept his free hand toward Kate. "This is my sister, Catherine DeWitt. We

spoke about her.”

Oh, you did, did you? Kate rose regally and presented the man with her right hand. “So good to meet you. Sam, is it?”

He held her hand perhaps a few seconds longer than necessary, giving her a smile more rakish than businesslike. “I prefer ‘G,’ actually, while we’re here.”

“Oh.” Kate took back her hand. “Then I prefer ‘Lady DeWitt,’ if you don’t mind. Unless, of course, you’d rather we dispense with all that and act like normal people. Then ‘Kate’ is fine. Your choice.”

Sam exchanged glances with Charlie, then smiled at her again. “Right. ‘Sam’ it is. Shall we be seated?”

Kate swept her royal-blue suit skirt under her thighs and sat primly, ankles crossed, hands folded on her lap. She’d show Charlie presentable. “Sam, may I ask which agency you represent?”

“You can ask, but I can’t answer.” Another smile. At least he had good teeth.

“Is it the same nameless agency Charlie works for?”

“No. A different one.” He settled in, lit a pipe he produced from an inside coat pocket, then tossed the used matchstick in a nearby glass ashtray. “Kate, do you know anything about Ireland?”

Not the opening question she’d expected. “Well... I do know we’ve been abusing the Irish since, oh, Henry the Eighth, I believe, and that they turfed us out in 1921. Is that helpful?”

The smile froze on Sam’s lips. After a moment, he turned to Charlie and murmured, “You didn’t mention this part. Is she—”

Charlie signaled him to stop. “Don’t worry about it,” he said quietly. “I told you she has

her own mind. Just skip the preliminaries and cut to the meat of it. She'll be fine."

Kate drawled, "You do know I can hear both of you, right?"

"Sorry." Sam placed a fountain pen on top of the file folder and pushed it across the tabletop toward her. "We'll need you to sign some papers before we go much further."

The file contained two copies of an Official Secrets Act Declaration: My attention has been drawn to the provisions of the Official Secrets Acts, 1911 and 1920, which are set out on the back of this document...

Kate glanced up at Charlie. "I already signed one of these for you. If I sign this for him, will you hang me twice if I give away any secrets?"

"You'll be hung under mine. For his, you'll be drawn and quartered." Charlie somehow kept his face entirely serious.

"I see. What fun!" She signed both copies and slid the folder back to Sam, who shook his head in either wonder or disbelief.

"Thank you." Sam took a calming draw from his pipe, then leaned back in his chair. "Here's the situation. Stop me if I go too fast for you or say things you don't understand. We'll start with the Irish Free State. It's the southern part of the island."

"Yes, I know. They fought us in their war for independence from 1919 to 1921. I followed it closely with my governess. It was part of my current events education. The war ended in a treaty and they formed their own government."

Sam sat with his pipe clenched in his teeth, unmoving. He slowly removed his pipe and tried to look cheery. "Yes. Top marks. We can push on, then. Actually, it's a misconception that the Irish are independent. They're not, not legally at least, though they like to pretend they are. They still have a governor general like any other dominion, although they tend to ignore him.

They're still obligated to swear allegiance to the Crown, though they tend not to. We still occupy three ports the treaty granted use rights to us. We call them the Treaty Ports."

"How clever," Kate deadpanned.

Charlie cleared his throat. When Kate glanced his way, he flattened his hand and pushed it toward the tabletop. Tone it down.

"Moving along." Sam shifted uncomfortably in his chair. "Modern day. Someone has been flying weapons into the Free State for a group called the Real Irish Volunteers. They're a splinter off the Irish Republican Army."

Kate raised her hand. "Are there faux Irish Volunteers?"

"No doubt, but we're not concerned with them just now. We're not entirely certain what they aim to do with these weapons, but it's a safe wager it has something to do with destabilizing northern Ireland. That's the loyalist part, by the way. Our people."

"I'm aware of that."

"Good show. The weapons may be originating in Germany."

Nazis again? "What sort of weapons?"

Sam gave Kate a questioning look. Charlie leaned toward him and murmured, "She's a better shot than I am."

"Only with inanimate objects," Kate explained.

Sam lofted his eyebrows. "Right. Everything's crated and we haven't seen inside the crates, but judging from their size and weight, it's small arms. That means rifles and pistols."

"I know. I expect they'd also send ammunition, since the German rifles use different cartridges than British ones."

"Ehm. Yes, in fact." Sam threw another shaded glance at Charlie, then composed

himself. “It appears a group of Nazi sympathizers in the north is organizing these shipments.”

“German or English?”

“English.” Sam smiled rather smugly and aimed his pipe’s mouthpiece at her. “I wager you’d be surprised how many there are. Fascists, Mussolini supporters, Hitler supporters—”

“You’d lose. I’m not surprised in the least.” Kate returned Sam’s condescending smile. “I grew up around them. The aristocracy’s riddled with them. It’s a wonder that we still have something of a democracy.” She extended a placating hand to Sam. “I am rather surprised they’re actually doing something rather than simply talking about it. That’s not usually our way.”

Sam’s eyebrows crowded each other. ““Our’?”

“The nobility, of course. We’re great talkers but not great doers. Case in point: the House of Lords.”

Sam’s eyes swiveled toward Charlie. Charlie nodded and said, “She’s right, you know.”

“I wouldn’t know.” Sam’s smiles had grown slower and stiffer. “My parents didn’t travel in those circles.”

“How happy for you,” Kate chirped. “You had a chance for a normal childhood.”

Sam puffed his pipe for a few moments, visibly trying to bring down his blood pressure. He finally said, “We’ve completely lost the thread here: Nazi fellow-travelers sending German weapons to a radical group in Ireland. In the worst case, they may be preparing to wreck the balance of peace on the island. To what end, we’re not certain. Is this clear to everyone?”

Charlie nodded grimly. Kate took pity on the poor man—he was merely trying to do his job—and followed Charlie’s lead.

“Right. We’re now facing a complication. Have you ever heard of Éamon de Valera?”

“The Free State’s president.” As if anyone alive in the British Isles wouldn’t have heard

the man's name in the past twenty years.

“Ehm, yes, well, the president of the Free State's Executive Council. That makes him essentially head of state even though they're not a nation. Anyway, he's been working for months on a new constitution. Our sources indicate that he'll unveil this new constitution in the next month or two, and it'll be a declaration of independence from the Empire.”

Good for them, Kate thought. It's past time that we let them solve the problems we've caused them.

“We understand de Valera has committed to presenting the constitution in a plebiscite. That means his people will get to vote on whether to approve it.”

It's official; he thinks me a ninny. “I'm familiar with the word, thank you.”

“Yes. Well. With this vote, I can't think of a situation more likely to descend into violence and chaos, especially with the Irish involved. Our estimate is that if the RIV decides to make a move, it'll be during this campaign or very soon afterwards. That means we're running out of time to crack this nut.”

Kate understood the political issues but didn't see how any of it affected her. She raised her hand again. “If I may. You said they're flying the weapons to Ireland. That seems... inefficient. Most of the aircraft I'm familiar with that can take off and land on unimproved fields can't carry much weight. They'd be far better served by landing the cargo from ships. Why fly?”

“It's simple, really, though it may be hard for you to understand,” Sam said as if they were discussing celestial physics. “Ireland may be an island, but it's a dashed rocky one. There are relatively few places where the RIV or the IRA can safely land contraband from the sea. Between the Royal Navy and the Garda—the Free State's police—most of those are too closely guarded to use. This doesn't take into account the Garda roadblocks meant to stop just this sort

of thing. The sponsors or the RIV may have opted to trade away some efficiency for more certainty.”

“Interesting.” Kate took a moment to think about the logistics of such an operation. The one tour the Knights made of Ireland revealed a distinct lack of airfields, not to mention electricity or paved roads. It was more like operating in the Balkans than in Britain, including the warlords and the medieval living conditions. But she could see how the scheme could work.

“What type of aeroplane are they using?”

Sam’s face went blank for a moment; then he rallied. “It’s a de Havilland. I believe it’s called a Dragon.” He chuckled. “Sounds fearsome, doesn’t it?”

“A Dragon 1 or a Dragon 2?” Kate hazarded a glance at Charlie and caught him in mid-eye roll.

Sam’s chuckle died. “I’m not aware of the difference.”

“The Mark 2 had additional streamlining and somewhat better performance. Amy Johnson had one for a while.”

“Amy...?”

“Oh, surely you know of her.” This was Kate’s revenge for Sam asking if she’d heard of Éamon de Valera. “Britain’s Amelia Earhart? She’s been in all the papers. For years. Anyway, it’s a common aeroplane and I understand it’s a good flier, though I’ve not flown it myself.” She crossed her hands on the tabletop and leaned toward Sam. “But you had someone flying for this Nazi cabal, didn’t you?”

Sam’s eyes ballooned. “What makes you say that?”

“Because if you hadn’t, you wouldn’t know the cargo weights, as you said you do. The pilot would need that information for loading the weapons. Therefore, you spoke to the pilot.”

Sam rounded on Charlie. “Did you tell her?” he snapped.

“No.” Charlie leaned an elbow on a chair arm and propped his chin on his fingers. “My sister has a way of sussing these things. You get used to it after a spell.”

After discovering his pipe had gone cold, Sam sighed and turned back to Kate. “Yes. The pilot was our man. He flew several shipments for the sponsors—they’re from the Imperial Fascist League, a swastika on their Union Jack, of all things—and told us a fair amount about them. Less about the Irish on the other end, unfortunately. And then...he left. Near the end of March. He packed his bags, paid his bar bill, and disappeared.”

And now I know why I’m here, Kate thought. “What became of him?”

“We’re not certain. He was a drinker. Our current favorite theory is that he took his earnings and went on a spree. He might come back eventually once he’s out of money, but he’s of no further use to us, not if he’s this unreliable.”

Sam settled into what he may not have intended to be a staring contest with Kate, though that’s what it became. Charlie had learned many years ago not to try such a thing. When he finally lost the contest, Sam folded his arms on the table and gave Kate his most earnest look of the afternoon. “Kate, would you consider stepping in and flying for us?”

Kate regarded the ceiling. It was as flat and dull as the rest of the room—no crown molding or frieze, no decorative plasterwork—offering nothing to distract her thoughts. “Just so I understand you: your pilot upped sticks and disappeared without a trace, and now you want me to replace him. Correct?”

“Correct.”

“Is it at all possible that the fascists or the Irish killed the man?”

Sam coughed out the first note of a laugh. “Well, as I said, he packed his bags and settled

his tick. Murder victims don't usually get that opportunity."

"Perhaps he did that before he was killed."

"I reckon that's possible. The fascists tried to contact him several times, though. That's hardly something they'd do if they already knew he was dead."

"The Irish, then."

"Is this your way of saying 'no'?"

She caught the note of irritation in Sam's voice, which irritated her. "No," she snapped. "This is my way of saying I need to know how much danger I'm facing if I say 'yes.' Is that unreasonable? If so, this discussion is over." Kate watched Charlie flash a warning glance at Sam, who appeared to be weighing whether to call this exchange a bad job and leave.

"No." Sam swallowed deeply. "I can't tell you what happened. Yes, it's quite possible someone did for him, but I've no evidence of it, and he never mentioned being on bad terms with anyone on either end of the operation. There is an element of danger in any of our missions."

"Yes, I know." A few moments of calm passed, letting both of them settle. "Where's the aeroplane now?"

"At the pilot's airfield. Penhill, I think it is. Outside Swindon."

Penhill? The name jolted Kate several years into the past. She'd spent many happy hours at Penhill over fifteen years ago. A field, a barn, a windsock. "I used to fly there," she finally said, nearly whispering. "What was your man's name?"

Sam frowned back at her. "Well, if you must know, it was Conklin. Frank Conklin."

Frank Conklin. The name exploded in her skull.

Kate bounded out of her chair and fled out the door.

V. A Name from Long Ago

Kate gripped the iron railing tightly enough to turn her knuckles white. She stood with her eyes closed, her face upturned to bathe in the sun streaming through the light well's skylight.

Frank. What were you thinking, man? How did you—

“Katie?” Charlie’s voice, gentle behind her, his heels tapping on the marble tiles. His strong hands folded over her shoulders and squeezed. “Are you alright?”

“I don’t know.” It came out as little more than a breath. The shock still winded her.

“You knew him, didn’t you.”

“Yes.”

“Were...were you lovers?”

“Oh, good God, no!” She could still speak up. Kate spun to frown at Charlie. “Nothing like that. I was just a girl. But he...he made me.”

Charlie’s eyebrows tilted in alarm. “Made you do what?”

“Not like that. He made me. He created me. I’m a pilot because of him. He gave me my first flight and taught me how to fly. I tested for my ‘A’ license in his aeroplane. Everything I’ve done in the air since was because of what he gave to me.” As she spoke, pictures of the past flooded her mind.

Fifteen-year-old Kate whooping and cheering through her very first flight, with Frank at the controls.

Seventeen-year-old Kate waddling across the Penhill turf in one of Frank’s leather flight

helmets and an ill-fitting boiler suit bought from the Chippenham Cooperative Society.

The endless green fields of Wiltshire stretching in all directions a thousand feet below Kate, now in the front cockpit, with Frank shouting, “Stop sightseeing, Katie girl! You’re driving this ship!”

And now he’s gone.

“Did you know he drank?” Charlie asked carefully.

“Of course, I knew. When we were on the ground, it was rare that he didn’t have a fag in one hand and his flask in the other. But it wasn’t until the end that I saw him corked, and I never knew him to go on a spree.” She dropped her gaze to the floor. “Then again, it’s been fifteen years since last I saw him. People change.” A pang: I should’ve visited. I shouldn’t have abandoned him. He might’ve needed a friend. “Does Sam know about all this?”

“I doubt it. He seemed totally at sea when you stormed out.”

“I’m sure he thinks I’m a silly, emotional woman now.” Kate finally looked up, finding Charlie peering at her with a tight mouth and crunched eyebrows. “Why am I here? Whose idea was this?”

“I fear it was mine.” Charlie had the decency to look sheepish about it. “Sam’s a mate from Cambridge. When he heard I was in town, he rang me and asked if I knew anyone who could do what he needs. I told him you’re a pilot and more than capable of this sort of job. I said you were brilliant in Spain and he appeared to get past his disappointment in your sex.” He harrumphed. “Obviously, not entirely. His agency dislikes hiring women.”

“Everyone dislikes hiring women. I shouldn’t expect him to be any different. If it causes them such pain, why am I here? Why don’t they simply grab a passing RAF pilot and use him?”

“To start with, there aren’t so many of those at loose ends. The RAF is building up just

like everyone else. And..." Charlie's face suggested his lunch was fighting his digestive tract. "Sam's spoken to several pilots the Service has worked with in the past and they all said 'no.'"

That news wasn't unexpected, but it still burned in Kate's gut. She crossed her arms aggressively and glared at him. "But Kate's such a bubblehead, she'll say 'yes' to anything, right?"

"No!" Charlie raised both hands palms-out, though whether it was to signal stop or I surrender, Kate couldn't tell. "Nothing of the sort. But I do know that Kate's keen to be paid, isn't she?"

She took a sudden interest in the fluted column next to her.

Charlie leaned to his right to engage her eyes again. "You've expenses, haven't you? You've a writ to fight, if I remember correctly. Well, here's your opportunity."

"Did you tell him that?" she growled.

"Of course not. That's your secret to reveal, should you feel the need. Now, can you stop being miffed with me for a moment and listen to something that may help you?"

After a moment, she grumbled, "Go on."

"Right. Yes, Sam's an ass. He always has been. His father's an ass, so Sam comes by it honestly. But he means well. He—"

"He means well?" Kate spat out a loud "bah!" that echoed down the hallway. "We can cover up anything with, 'Well, he means—'"

"Stop." His tone killed the next word in her throat. "Stop performing. I know exactly what's going through your head—I can read it in your eyes. Will you for once please listen?"

She sighed. She'd been unfair to Charlie—after all, he wasn't the one treating her like a clueless deb—but the entire situation irritated her. "Get on with it, then."

“Sam’s up against it. He needs this operation to keep going, and having a pilot is critical. The Service depends on enthusiastic civilians like you and Conklin to do its business. The government nearly shut it down after the Irish War and they’ve been slow to rebuild it ever since.”

“What’s this ‘Service’ you keep talking about?”

“It’s...” He leaned his head closer to Kate’s. “Don’t tell anyone—especially Sam—that I told you this. He works for the Security Service.”

Kate could tell he meant that to be meaningful. Unfortunately, it wasn’t. “What do they do?”

“They’re concerned with security inside the United Kingdom. Counterespionage, countersubversion, that sort of thing.”

The sun rose in Kate’s brain. Suddenly all was clear. “They’re our secret police!”

“No, no, no. They’re not police at all—they can’t arrest anyone; it’s outside their remit. They’re not the British Gestapo. That would be Special Branch, and they’re hardly secret.”

“I see.” She stood on tiptoes and maneuvered her lips next to Charlie’s ear. “Who do you work for?”

He pulled back. “I’m not supposed to tell you that.”

“Charlie.” Kate folded her arms again. “I signed all those papers. They can put my head on a spike outside the Tower if I tell anyone. Who was I working for in Spain?”

Charlie actually looked both ways down the empty hallway before bending to whisper in her ear. “The Secret Intelligence Service.”

She giggled. “Good Lord, that’s a silly name. It’s straight out of Biggles.”

“It’s nicely descriptive. We’re concerned with external security. Foreigners.”

“So, are the Irish inside or outside?”

“Both and neither. We’re still working that out.” He gave both of Kate’s shoulders a squeeze. “You have some negotiating power here. You can’t ask for more money; there isn’t any. Perhaps they can do something you need that’s difficult for you.”

“Can they lock Phillip in the Tower?”

“No.”

“What good are they, then?” Kate turned her face to the sun again as she absorbed all this information. “How dangerous is this really? I can’t stop thinking of Frank. He’s disappeared. Tell me the truth: How likely am I to disappear?”

Charlie stepped beside her and leaned his forearms on the railing. “You already know that operations like these can be risky. The RIV’s been known to execute traitors.” He paused, watching her face grow serious. “That said, they won’t expect a woman. They never allowed their women to fight during their war with us or their civil war. Too much delicate Irish manhood at stake. It’s not an absolute guarantee, but you’ll have an advantage.”

“Thank you.” Kate mulled this over. “Do I have to answer straightaway? I’ve a lot of thinking to do.”

“No. But don’t take too long or they’ll go with someone else.”

“If there is a someone else. Tell Sam I’ll have an answer for him by Friday.”

VI. Flying into the Past

Kate paid off the taxi driver and got her first good look at Penhill airfield in ages. The last fifteen years had completely passed it by. A long, grassy field with a slight downhill slope; a weather-beaten barn with the remnants of “PENHILL” painted above the open doors; a rusting fuel lorry slumbering next to the barn; a once-orange windsock listlessly rocking on its pole. By reflex, Kate glanced at the sky: clear, scattered clouds at five thousand feet, a southeast breeze of two or three knots. Lovely flying weather. Too bad she didn’t have a working airplane.

She strode toward the makeshift hangar up a dirt path along the western edge of the field. Once upon a time it had been graveled, a blessing in winter, but only a few small, straggling rocks remained of that. The brambles encroaching on the path made her glad she’d worn her high-waisted blue trousers and oxfords rather than a dress and pumps.

Two aircraft perched before the barn. She bypassed the de Havilland Dragon to reach the smaller and more familiar biplane, stopped, then shook her head in sorrow.

The Avro 504 two-seat trainer had been a tidy ship once, cream with forest-green trim. Now the green had turned gray and the cream had curdled. The linen skin sagged from the wooden fuselage frame. Its wheels hid in grass and weeds up to the hubs. If a scarecrow could fly, it would look much like this.

“Oh, Doris,” Kate whispered, “what’s become of you?”

She stepped carefully to the port fuselage at the lower wing’s trailing edge. An abandoned bird’s nest filled the lower foothold. She stretched up on tiptoes and touched the

cracked leather coaming around the rear cockpit where she'd spent so much time so long ago.

May 1920

"But I'm not ready yet!" Seventeen-year-old Kate hugged herself against the cold, sharp wind and her own fear.

"Katie girl," Frank said in his Lancashire growl, "you're more'n ready. You're more ready than any of my students since I discharged. So get in the bloody cockpit and fly the bloody airplane."

"Lieutenant!" Mrs. Forsyth's voice sizzled across the grass like a rifle shot. She'd been hovering a few yards away for propriety's sake. "Language, please."

Frank heaved out a sigh. "Yes, Mrs. Forsyth. Sorry." He leaned toward Kate and dropped his voice. "You wanted this since your first flight with me. You pushed through your lessons so you could get to this. You was born for this. You're a natural. This flight ain't no different than the others."

"Yes, it is." Kate pressed her crossed arms against her heaving stomach. "You won't be there with me. What if I make a mistake? Who'll help me?"

"A mistake?" He laughed. "Katie girl, you don't make mistakes! How many times did I take the stick from you?"

"Once," she told the grass.

"Right. Once. In your first bloody lesson!"

"Lieutenant!"

"Yes, yes. Sorry, Mrs. Forsyth." Frank squeezed Kate's shoulder through her quilted gray boiler suit. "You ain't never made that mistake again. Like I said, you're a natural. It took me six

lessons before I soloed. Six! You got three and you're more ready than I was. If I thought you wasn't, I wouldn't let you go up."

"Really?" Why didn't she feel ready? Why was she so scared? She'd never been scared when Frank was in the Avro with her. Even in her last lesson when she was in the front cockpit for the first time, just knowing he was behind her, protecting her, encouraging her, was all she needed to fly without a worry. But this flight, this solo...

"Cross my heart." He leaned close enough for her to smell the cigarette smoke on his leather jacket, then murmured, "Besides. Anything happens to you, she'll beat the stuffin' outta me." He thumbed over his shoulder toward Mrs. Forsyth. "Not risking that."

A laugh exploded out of Kate's mouth. She clamped her hand over it but not in time to keep Mrs. Forsyth from twirling around to see what was going on. Once Kate felt safe releasing her mouth, she whispered, "She will, too."

"I know." He winked, then straightened. "Right. Do your walkaround. I'll follow, but I won't say nothing. Then get in the cockpit and take her up. Doris'll take care of you. She's a good girl. Fly for a full hour. You can burn circles round here, but that's a sorry waste of petrol. Go see the sights. Buzz your house. When you come back, you'll be a proper pilot."

"Alright." Kate ignored the eagles flying through her stomach, stood straight, and saluted Frank. He returned the salute smartly. She trotted to Mrs. Forsyth, hugged her governess fiercely, then proceeded to become a proper pilot.

April 1937

"Miss? May I help you?"

Kate blinked back into the here-and-now. It had been so vivid—a memory from

yesterday, not seventeen years ago. She could still feel the wind, the weight of that ugly boiler suit, how light and insubstantial she seemed when she climbed into the cockpit. Was I ever so young?

“Miss?”

She turned to see an older but still familiar version of the airfield’s owner, a stocky, heavy-shouldered man wearing a worn green-tweed coat and broad-brimmed felt hat. “Mr. Blethlyn. You’re still here.”

He squinted at her. “Have we met?” he said in a country accent Kate remembered from her home in Wiltshire.

Time has passed, hasn’t it? “Yes. I was one of Frank’s students a long time ago. We spoke a few times. Kate Gorham.” She extended her hand to shake.

Blethlyn took her hand as if it were spun glass. After two shakes, his eyes widened. “I remember you. You were the only girl he ever taught.” He slowly scanned her from hair to heels. “You’ve grown. You were just a slip of a girl.”

“I was no such thing, but thank you.” She swept a hand toward the Avro. “Doris has seen her day. Why is she so ragged? I can’t imagine Frank letting her go to seed like this.”

He sized up the Avro the way he might a dairy cow past its prime. “I reckon it’s because he ain’t got a use for it anymore, now he can’t teach.”

“He can’t? Why not?”

Blethlyn shrugged. “On account he lost his license three years on or so.”

“His teaching certificate?”

“If that’s what it’s called.”

Kate stood rooted, staring at the Avro while that news echoed through her skull. He used

to love teaching. He was so happy when he talked about his other students. What happened to you, Frank?

“He drank, you know,” Blethlyn said as if describing the weather. “It does things to a man.”

“I know.” Kate drifted to the trainer’s nose, then stopped to finger what had once been cream script on the green cowling: Doris. “Did he ever tell you who Doris was?”

“No, never.” He buried his hands in his pockets and surveyed the ruined airplane with the eyes of a man who hated the waste of perfectly good machinery. “I reckoned she was an old girlfriend or something. I never asked.”

“Too bad. I asked him once when he was...talkative.” Meaning mildly corked. “All he said was, ‘She’s the one who got away.’ He named the Nieuport he flew in France ‘Doris,’ also. She must’ve been very special to him.” She turned her back to the Avro before it drove her into a blue funk. “Where’s Frank? I’d hoped to see him, but he’s clearly not here.”

“No, he’s not. Hasn’t been for a month. Last I saw him, he was going somewhere in the new plane”—he pointed to the Dragon—“but when I come back two days later, the plane is here but he’s gone. He left a note.”

“A note? What sort of note?”

“Lessee...” Blethlyn stared toward the peak of the barn’s roof for a few seconds. “‘Going away for a spell. Pray for me.’ That’s it.”

Kate’s head was too full of a vanished past and an unsatisfactory present to put any effort into decoding that message, if indeed it needed any. “Thank you for telling me about that. Do you mind if I explore the Dragon a bit?”

“No, go ahead.” He waved toward the plane dismissively. “If you can find the keys. I’ll

be about doing some work, so call if you need anything.”

Kate favored him with one of her nicer smiles. “Thank you so much. You’ve been very helpful. It’s Perry, isn’t it? Your given name?”

He smiled for the first time. “It is. You remember?”

“I’m good with names. Sometimes it takes a bit of effort to find them, though.”

Once Blethlyn lumbered off to the far side of the barn, Kate trotted directly to the long workbench inside and ran her fingertips along its underside. She quickly encountered a wire ring with two keys attached. Then she returned to the Dragon for a quick walkaround.

It was a handsome aircraft rather than a pretty one, with a smooth, streamlined fuselage and a prominent snout that could fairly be described as Roman. The twin engines perched on the bottom wings close to the fuselage. A large greenhouse canopy covered the cockpit, while five windows on each side provided a view for the passengers. Individual frames on the windows and chromed teardrop spats over the landing gear confirmed this was the faster Mark 2 model. Kate ran her fingertips along the Dragon’s fog-gray flanks and came away with flecks of paint. The streaks suggested someone had used a coarse brush to quickly apply a cheap finish.

One of the keys unlocked the port passenger door. She stepped carefully up the narrow aisle between the three cracked leather seats on each side, then wriggled through a teardrop door into the roomy cockpit. Her feet didn’t reach the rudder pedals; the seat was set for Frank’s height, not hers. She carefully examined the cockpit, both to orient herself and to look for anything Frank left behind. A few exploratory reaches for controls confirmed the seat was too far back, but try as she might, she couldn’t find an adjustment lever.

As she scouted the cockpit floor, she found a yellowed card the size of an invitation. Bringing it into the light revealed Chocques Sep. 1915 written in nearly invisible pencil near the

top. She flipped over the card and came face-to-face with Frank Conklin.

Still young—closer to the man she met in early 1918—dressed in his Royal Flying Corps khaki and peaked cap. Over a dozen other young men surrounded him beside a spindly biplane with two cockpits. A B.E.2, she remembered. The young corporal next to Frank held a Lewis gun upright; cigarettes hung at jaunty angles out of the mouths of others.

He'd shown Kate this photo years before. He always took it into the cockpit with him. The closest he ever got to explaining his war service was, Most of these here men are dead, and I should be. She didn't understand why he carried the picture until she started taking her snap of Michael with her every time she climbed behind the controls. It was a totem, a memory made solid, a reminder of a person or people she and Frank had lost one way or another.

Frank wouldn't simply leave this here. If he meant to abandon the Dragon, he'd take the snap with him. Was he in a hurry? Was he afraid? Did he mean to come back?

Kate found Blethlyn hoeing weeds along the barn's east side. She asked, "Where did Frank sleep?"

He rested his hands atop the hoe's handle. "He kept a room at the Bakers Arms down in Upper Stratton. Spent his money drinking his supper, y'know." Blethlyn gave her walking directions, claiming it was an easy stroll of less than a mile.

Kate showed him the photo. "I found this in the Dragon. I know it's important to him. If he turns up, will you tell him I have it? I'll be happy to return it."

Blethlyn nodded. "If he turns up. What if he don't?"

She slipped the photo into her handbag. "Then he won't miss it, and I'll keep it safe."



The Bakers Arms—a tidy, white, two-story building with wide bay windows stretching

across the ground-floor façade—smelled of ale and cooking meat and the frypan, reminding Kate that she hadn't had a proper lunch and suppertime was fast approaching. A half-dozen tweedy early drinkers watched her closely as she stepped to the counter and signaled to the barman. "Are you Rory Shelby? Perry Blethlyn sent me."

The youngish man approached cautiously. The arms, chest, and shoulders struggling against his collared white shirt and dark waistcoat suggested he'd shifted his share of ale kegs. "I'm Shelby," he admitted. "You are...?"

"Kate Gorham." The name Blethlyn knew her by, in case he and Shelby compared notes. "I'm looking for Frank Conklin and I understand he keeps a room here."

"He did until he pis—sorry, moved off."

"Oh. When did you last see him?"

He gazed out the nearest bay window toward the fringes of Swindon beyond. "Can't say. Ehm, still March. Late." Shelby peered at her, his mouth rounded down. "Who's he to you? Family?"

"Almost. He was like a father to me." White lies are only venial sins. "Now he's disappeared and I'm trying to find him. What was he doing when last you saw him?"

Once again, Shelby watched the spotty traffic pass by while he thought. "Eating. Over there." He pointed to a small, square table in the far corner. "His usual."

He's a talkative one. "His usual dinner or his usual table?"

"Both."

This had become tedious. Maybe money will get him talking? "That reminds me: I'm rather hungry. Might I get a curry and a pint of strong, please?"

He scrawled the order on a pad he produced from his apron, set it on the edge of a pass-

through, then started polishing a pint glass. “Arkell’s alright?”

“That would be fine. Was Frank alone? Did he speak with anyone?”

Shelby concentrated on pouring the perfect pint with the perfect head. Kate usually appreciated the effort, but just now it seemed like stalling. He finally presented Kate with his masterpiece, then edged down the counter as if to escape her.

“Shelby,” she prompted. “Was Frank alone?”

His jaw flexed. He planted a fist, palm down, on the counter. “At first.” His voice was becoming tighter, as was his face.

“Then?”

“God, woman, don’t you stop asking questions?”

“I do when I run out. What happened? Did someone join him? Talk to him?”

“A bloke.” The points of his jaw flexed white. “Comes in, sits with him. A chin-wag. Then the bloke leaves.” Shelby rubbed a towel over an invisible spot on the counter. “Frank never had company. Kept himself to himself. Ate his supper, drank his stout, fell up the stairs. That was Frank.”

Shelby ushered Kate into a storage room in the back when she asked after Frank’s things. He seemed relieved to get the stray woman out of sight. She perched on a crate with her plate of chicken curry balanced on her knees while she picked through the rubbish Frank left behind. The only thing of value was his winter flying suit, rolled up in a canvas sack. A cardboard grocery box held the random bits and bobs that accumulate in coat pockets and the bottoms of handbags: crumpled lists, a Swindon cinema ticket, a mostly empty pack of Player’s Mediums, a half-used matchbook, a London bus timetable, and a wristwatch without a strap.

She turned the watch body in her hand, curious. A Smith & Son trench model from the

Great War, with large, luminous numbers and hands and a seconds dial set where the “6” should be. As a lark, she wound the watch and was astonished to see the second hand tick happily around its little track. Why didn’t Frank wear this anymore? It was good and sturdy, still in decent shape. With a shrug, she slipped it into her trouser pocket, downed her last swallow of ale, then slung the canvas bag with Frank’s flying suit over her shoulder and marched out to find a cab to the station.

The world melted into darkness as Kate gazed silently out the train’s third-class compartment window, mulling what she’d learned. One evening, Frank met with a light-haired man wearing a flat cap and workingman’s clothes (she’d dragged the description out of Shelby), then completely emptied his home of four years and left. He either flew the Dragon someplace and returned, or planned to leave Penhill immediately after...what? Either way, his talisman photo was already positioned in the cockpit, waiting for him. He’d never voluntarily leave it behind.

The more she thought, the more convinced she became that Frank didn’t simply “disappear”—someone made him do it.

VII. Conditions

“I’ll do it.”

Kate stifled a laugh when Sam’s eyes turned as big and round as a shilling. He couldn’t quash a triumphant smile, which he shared with Charlie before settling back in his chair and rapping the conference table with his knuckles. “Well, that’s just capital!” he crowed. “I’m glad you made a sensible decis—”

“I have conditions.”

Sam’s self-satisfied smile froze on his lips. Then he laughed. “Dear girl, this isn’t a negotiation. We—”

“But that’s exactly what it is.” Kate had worn her most severe black suit just for this moment. She leaned her elbows on the table, rested her chin on her folded hands, and stared straight into Sam’s blue-gray eyes. “You said as much yourself. You mislaid Frank Conklin a month ago and you’re still rummaging for a replacement. That you’re talking to me at all proves you haven’t any male candidates at hand. Otherwise, you’d choose an unqualified male rather than a qualified female. You’re grasping at straws. So, I’ll help you, but I have conditions.”

His face rearranged itself from amusement to scorn. “Let me explain something to you, old girl. I’m a representative of His Majesty’s government. You don’t haggle with the government as you would some Jew rug merchant. You should be pleased with this opportunity to serve King and country in some more rigorous way than knitting scarves for the boys at the front or whatever you did during the war.”

Kate let him finish because his sheer affrontery stunned her for a moment. “Have you any idea what I’ve been doing since January?”

Charlie finally roused himself. “Katie, no.”

She rounded on him. “You didn’t tell him?”

“No.” He cut a glance at Sam. “He’s not cleared.”

Sam gave Charlie a highly skeptical look. “Cleared for what, old dog?”

“For what she did for us. In Spain.” Charlie’s low, hard tone felt more menacing than would shouting and throwing things.

After a moment, Sam chuckled and shook his head. “She went to Spain? For your lot? With the Internationals, I assume?”

Kate opened her mouth to reply, but Charlie rose a warning finger. It was as menacing as a gun. “Katie, stop.” He swiveled his suddenly stern, dark eyes like a battleship’s guns toward Sam. “Sam. I’ll try to get you read in. I doubt I can, but I’ll ask. In the meantime, you’ll have to take my word that Katie has form at this sort of thing and is more than capable of doing this job.” He leaned toward Sam, bracing his hand on the tabletop. “She’s right, you know.” His voice had become even quieter and chillier. “You’re over a barrel. So, you might consider listening to what the lady has to say. Old dog.”

Sam held Charlie’s stare for a moment, then fell back into his chair. “This is a side of you I don’t often get to see.” He turned to Kate, put on an impertinent expression, and crossed his arms. “Fine. Talk.”

Kate hadn’t seen this version of Charlie very often, either, and it always chilled her when she did. She sat straight and tilted up her chin, the lady’s answer to putting up her fists for a fight. “Right. How much are the fascists paying for flight services these days?”

Sam thought for a few beats, then said, “Fifty quid a flight, plus fuel and expenses. Quite a bit above normal rates.”

“I should hope, since it’s illegal.” Depending on how many flights they’d ask her for, this could be a tidy sum to lay by for a house or an airplane. “I enjoy the idea that the Nazis will pay for the privilege of being spied on. Now, normally I’d ask for more money, but I won’t because I have it on good authority you haven’t any. However, I’m sure there are things that both your agencies can help me with to make my participation both possible and more effective.

“First: I’ll need a cargo aircraft. Something like Conklin’s Dragon would be the ticket. Where did he get his?”

“From us,” Sam replied, nearly petulant. “We seized it a year ago. Don’t you need something larger?”

“Not unless the Nazis start moving tons of weapons. Larger means heavier, more fuel consumption, longer takeoff and landing rolls. I imagine I’ll be setting down in farmer’s fields. Also, larger usually means a copilot. As hard as you’ve worked to find me, how much harder do you reckon it’ll be to find a male pilot willing to fly right seat to a female chief pilot?” Sam’s sour look told her all she needed to know. “Right. I can use Conklin’s Dragon since he seems no longer in need of it. You’ll need to repaint it and re-register it in my name so it’s not obviously the same aircraft. Agreed?”

Sam looked to Charlie for moral support but found none. He sighed. “Yes. Fine.”

“Excellent!” So far, so good. Kate tamped down her enthusiasm so she wouldn’t get ahead of herself. “Next: perhaps you can find an RAF instructor at loose ends. I can teach myself how to fly the aeroplane, but I can’t teach myself how to load cargo properly. I also expect the Dragon’s capable of maneuvers of which I’m unaware. Besides, I need someone to sign off my

training time for when I ask the Air Ministry to add the Dragon to my ‘B’ license. We do want me to fly legally, don’t we?”

Sam frowned at his pipe as if it displeased him. “Of course.”

“How lovely. See? This isn’t as bad as you thought.” Kate ignored the glower Sam sent across the table. “Third: luckily for you, I already have a commercial license. Unluckily, the Air Ministry requires female pilots to recertify every four months. Of course, men have to do it only every six. Because of my government work, I was unable to return to England to recertify, so my license is now officially suspended. To recertify, I need a physical examination from the RAF’s Central Medical Board. I understand that its backlog is many weeks long. Perhaps the Home Office or Foreign Office could find a spot for me in the queue?”

Sam and Charlie exchanged you first glances. A minor staring contest ensued. Charlie finally said, “I’ll check on it.”

Sam murmured, “Decent of you, old dog.”

“Thank you both.” Kate had presented the three easiest conditions first; this next gave her flutters. “Finally: I want Charlie to be my handler.”

Both men sat up as if struck by lightning. Charlie barked, “Katie! You didn’t mention this. It’s not done.”

Sam sputtered, “Absolutely not! This is my operation. He’s not part of this agency. No, this is too—”

“I don’t care.” Kate pinned Sam’s ears back with her eyes. “I don’t like what little I know about you, and that means I don’t trust you. You lost your last pilot, after all, and it sounds like you’ve barely looked for him. I don’t care to be accidentally ‘lost’ and written off as a sot. I trust Charlie. He’ll look out for my interests. Second him or whatever you do in these situations, but I

won't do this unless I report directly to him.”

Sam stood, his lips turning to straight lines. “See here, old girl. You don't get to dictate how this operation or this agency works. There's a way things are done, and this isn't it.”

“Fine.” Kate started pulling on her black kid gloves. “If that's the case, I'll simply walk out that door”—she waved toward the conference room's entrance—“and go back to my life.” She stood regally, the way Mother had taught her, feigning a confidence she didn't feel. “And you'll get to keep searching for a pilot daft enough to say 'yes.' Who knows how long that will take? In the meantime, the fascists may find their own pilot. One you don't control.” She shouldered her handbag and stepped away from the table. “Which will it be, Sam?”

She didn't want to walk away. She wanted to finish Frank's work. She wanted to give the fascists a black eye and bloody nose. The money wasn't bad, either. But she absolutely wouldn't work for Sam; he'd bin her at a moment's notice, she was sure of it.

“Who exactly do you think you are?” Sam growled, his fists planted firmly on his hips.

“Your last, best hope. Goodbye, Sam. Charlie, see me out, will you?” She marched toward the door while her mind screamed don't leave! You need the money! You need the work!

When her hand grasped the knob, Sam blurted, “Wait!”

Kate looked back at him over her shoulder, attempting to look bored and impatient to leave. “Yes?”

“I have to run this up my chain of command.” Sam had to tell the tabletop; he apparently couldn't face her. “It's not a decision I can make alone. It may take a few hours. Charlie, I need you to help sell this.”

“Of course.” Charlie stood, straightened his waistcoat, then said, “Give us the room, please, Sam.”

“Right.” Sam stalked out the door.

Charlie spun and grabbed Kate’s arm. “What are you playing at?” he hissed. “Do you want the job or not? Insisting on this will scupper the entire thing.”

“Then so be it. I think Frank came to a bad end. Now I may step into his shoes. I need to know that I can trust the person behind me. You’ve seen how that man treats me—I refuse to work for him, full stop.”

“He may be difficult, but you can trust him.”

“Funny, that’s what you said about Carlos in Seville, too.” Kate didn’t hide the irritation in her voice.

Charlie growled and shook his head. “I know that didn’t work out ideally. He was our man until...until he wasn’t. I’ve known Sam for years. I’ll have a word, I’ll put him on his best behavior.”

“Is that possible?” she scoffed.

“Listen to me.” Charlie paused a moment, perhaps to regain his composure. “I have to go back to Barcelona in two weeks. I won’t be here.”

“Fine. Let me report to Smythe and Jones, then. But I won’t work with a stranger, no matter how well you say you know him. Where are they, anyway?”

“Smythe and Jones? Back in Spain, minding the shop while I’m gone. They won’t be here either.” He sighed. “I’ll go try to help Sam sell this to his people. You need to think seriously about whether you want to walk away from this because Sam hurt your feelings. Don’t prove his prejudices right.”



Kate was tempted to splash out on a lavish lunch with the three pounds Charlie gave her,

but instead pocketed two of them and settled for soup and a salad in a bistro on the building's ground floor. Now that she had time to review what had happened upstairs, her stomach lurched with uncertainty. Yes, Sam had been a boor, but she hadn't acted much better. Was it too late to make amends? Mother, of course, had her say. You stupid brat. Here you need a job to show that you're a responsible adult—not that there's much chance of anyone believing that—and when Charlie sets one up for you, you spit in his face! You ungrateful wretch! You deserve to lose your son. And on it went.

Charlie and a black-suited agency functionary fetched her after almost three hours. Kate had long before begun to fear she'd been left in office purgatory and was doomed to forever watch faceless, gray-suited men march past in an endless loop.

Sam stood at the head of the conference table with his arms crossed and face glum. "General Kell approved it," he said without a preliminary hello or welcome back. "Charlie's to be seconded to the operation as his agency's official liaison. This had nothing to do with your demand, DeWitt; it's because there's reason to believe a foreign power is involved. He'll retain operational control of all his agency's assigned assets. Do you understand?"

They did it! I won! Now she'd have time to reflect whether she wanted to win. "I do."

"Capital. Wind up your affairs in Oxfordshire and report by Monday to Latchmere House in Kingston upon Thames for orientation and training." Sam peered at Kate with undisguised dislike. "Your brother has told me that you follow your own lead. There'll be none of that here. This operation is too sensitive to have you making up your own orders. You must be a disciplined team member. Do you understand?"

Kate smiled sweetly at him. "Speak to my handler."

VIII. Five Hundred Years

North Dublin

Fifteen men gathered around a long-abused wooden table in the assembly room above a run-down pub deep in Phibsborough, sandwiched between the River Liffey and the Royal Canal. The newsprint pasted over the windowpanes kept out both streetlights and prying eyes. A green-white-orange Irish tricolor hung above the step-high platform that served as a stage. A framed, yellowed reprint of the Rising proclamation stood sentry by the door. Years-old IRA and anti-Treaty handbills dotted the walls.

The men didn't pay attention to the politics. They tore into a feast the likes of which many of them had never seen: shepherd's pie, colcannon, Dublin coddle, Irish stew, big loaves of fresh, chewy soda bread, Guinness (for the drinkers) and soda water (for the teetotals), with the promise of fresh Irish apple cake to follow. The aroma alone was enough to fill an empty belly.

Finlay Sheedy picked at the sausage in his coddle as he watched the new recruits celebrate their enlistment. Mostly young—though a few with weathered faces and thinning hair—wrapped in tired suits or worn-out coats, nearly all out of work or poorly employed. Whether they'd escaped a dingy hut in the country or a squalid slum a few blocks away, they ate with the desperation of men who hadn't seen three square meals a day for months, perhaps years, perhaps never before now. Sad it is, he thought, that some food and a bit of respect can make a man sign up to die.

He glanced toward the other end of the table. Bradaigh held court down there, telling

stories and laughing with the new men, holding his soda water high when someone made a comment he liked. Bradaigh could be the best mate a man could hope for when it suited him—too bad he was such a bastard so much of the time.

“Sir?” The young lad sitting next to Sheedy—barely out of his teens, his shirt a size too large and his flat cap a size too small—leaned close and spoke just above a whisper. “I hear you fought in Cork with Tom Barry in the Tan War. Is that so?”

Ancient history—maybe myth and legend, now. “‘Tis. I was a boy, younger than you even. I was a scout and a messenger with the First Southern Division when it formed. Then I became a soldier and fought the staters in the civil war.” He snorted. “Ended up in a camp for my trouble. What’s your name, son?”

“Liam, sir.”

“From Kerry?”

“Yes, sir.”

Sheedy nodded. “I’ve known a lot of Kerry men with the republicans.”

“Yes, sir.” Liam smiled. “Me da was one of ‘em. Me da’s da was an Invincible in ’82 and died in prison. An Auxie killed me da in ’21. I never knew him, but I’m right proud of him.”

“As well you should be, son.” Three generations of idealists. No wonder the killing never stops.

Once the meat bowls and plates lay in stacks in the center of the table and the girl from downstairs started laying out the apple cake, Bradaigh lumbered to his feet and cleared his throat the way a diesel engine does when it starts. “Lads!” he said in the voice he used to fill a drill field. “In case you don’t know already, I’m Bradaigh O’Bannon, Chief of Staff of the Real Irish Volunteers.” A few of the recruits whistled and clapped. Sheedy settled in for The Speech.

“I belonged to the original Irish Volunteers, the ones we’re named for. I was wounded at St. Stephen’s Green on the first day of the Rising and went to prison. The English were going to shoot me there but didn’t get to it, which I’m glad of.” A few of the recruits chuckled, as they often did. “I’ve fought for Ireland ever since. And I’ll stop when I’m dead.

“Why did we have this dinner here, of all places? It’s not the poshest dining room in Dublin, for sure for sure. We’re here because of the men Phibsborough gave to the cause. Sean Healy and James Kelly were both from here, and they were both Volunteers, and they both died in the Rising.” Bradaigh waved arcs in front of himself, a gesture as familiar to Sheedy as his bristly, graying shock of hair and his twice-broken nose. “I broke bread with ‘em both. Harry Boland was born here, and so was Dick McKee. I knew ‘em both, too. If you don’t know who they are, find out. Ask Finlay down there”—he tossed a finger toward Sheedy—“he knows everything.”

For the love of the Blessed Virgin, man, Sheedy gloomed, make up some new jokes. And of course, Bradaigh failed to mention that De Valera also lived in Phibsborough at the time of the Rising.

Bradaigh sipped from his water glass, then scanned the faces turned his way. “I welcome you to the Real Irish Volunteers.” Now that he had the audience’s attention, he could lower his voice. “Our brotherhood. Now that you’re done with your training, you are my brother and each other’s brother. Since we’re family, the most important thing is loyalty. We can fight and we can cuss and call each other black devils, but we’re always loyal to each other and to the cause. If you stop being loyal, then you stop being family and you start being a target.” He tapped the side of his head. “Keep that up here every day and night.

“So why did you lads join the Volunteers? The same reason I did, twenty years ago and

more. We believe in an Ireland entire and free. Not just this so-called 'Free State,' which is nothing of the sort, but also the six counties we abandoned to the English in 1921, when we betrayed the generations of good republicans who fought and died to rid this island of the sasanach."

Sheedy saw the blank looks on some of the new men. How many knew enough of the Irish language to understand the ancient slur for Englishmen? Of course, they'd be too embarrassed to ask what it meant.

Bradaigh leaned on a fist pressed against the table and let his voice slide into a growl. "We believe because we remember. We remember the five hundred years we lived with the English bootheel on our necks. We remember five hundred years of plantations and clearances and living as slaves on our own land. We remember five hundred years of countless, blameless men, women, even children murdered by the English invaders for the crime of wanting their freedom. And we remember five hundred years of bowing before the sword and pike and pistol and cannon of the enemy that built its riches and its power on the blood and sweat and tears of the Irish people." He stood straight and lingered in the pause. Not a man made a sound, even a cough. They never did.

Once the silence stretched to long enough and not an instant more, Bradaigh raised a finger and shook it. "We can never forget. And because we can never forget, we know what we must do. We must keep faith with the armies of Irish men and women who fought and died in every Irish rising since Henry the fecking Eighth first stepped foot on our sacred land. We must never stop fighting for an Ireland entire and free. We must push away the politicians who say 'later.' 'We'll have real independence later.' 'We'll free our brothers and sisters in the North later.' 'We'll boot out the sasanach later.'" He waved his finger back and forth. "There is no

more later, lads. The time is now. You, me, and the other Volunteers need to do what we should've done in '21 before the politicians took the English shilling and made us slaves again. We need to toss out that two-faced cute hoor who claims to be the president and put a proper republican in that chair. And once we do, we can take a proper army north and throw the English and their Unionist puppets in the Irish Sea and let them swim home if they can float.”

The man's mad, Sheedy thought. But he puts on a right good show.

“So eat up and drink up, lads!” Brady raised his arms like a benediction. “Tomorrow we have a house cleaning to do. The house is the size of Ireland. And there will be blood—the blood of traitors, and the blood of English devils.”