



# EMBERS *at* MIDNIGHT

In the chaos of  
war, survival  
is all.

**KATE LANCE**  
*Tempo Book 2*

# **Embers at Midnight**

**Kate Lance**

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BY THE SAME AUTHOR

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Non-Fiction

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*Redbill: From Pearls to Peace*

To Alison Shields, Gillian Clarke and Ruth Carson

with love and gratitude

*I caught this morning morning's minion, king-  
dom of daylight's dauphin, dapple-dawn-drawn Falcon, in his riding  
Of the rolling level underneath him steady air, and striding  
High there, how he rung upon the rein of a wimpling wing  
In his ecstasy! then off, off forth on swing,  
As a skate's heel sweeps smooth on a bow-bend: the hurl and gliding  
Rebuffed the big wind. My heart in hiding  
Stirred for a bird, - the achieve of, the mastery of the thing!*

*Brute beauty and valour and act, oh, air, pride, plume, here  
Buckle! AND the fire that breaks from thee then, a billion  
Times told lovelier, more dangerous, O my chevalier!*

*No wonder of it: shéer plód makes plough down sillion  
Shine, and blue-bleak embers, ah my dear,  
Fall, gall themselves, and gash gold-vermilion.*

***The Windhover - Gerard Manley Hopkins (1877)***

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## 1. Eliza: A Confidential Path

Golden Charlotte always gets what she wants. In this case it's my brother Pete swearing his life unto hers, here at the Registry Office. (Even the bride's famous charm could not convince the local vicar to let a divorcée wed in his church.)

The bridal bouquet is heavy, a mass of lilies as lush as Charlotte herself, and I'm tired. Any day with Charlotte can seem long but this one started particularly early.

Yet Pete is so happy. My feckless baby brother is a man now, dark-haired, rangy, strong. He's a farmer at heart and an engineer by profession, although once, in another life with another woman, he was a pilot. But now he's landed his beloved Charlotte, and they kiss and turn to the wedding guests as the organ rings out in triumph.

Eight-month-old Vivian gurgles in the arms of the housekeeper and waves her small hands at her parents. The polite fiction has it she's from Charlotte's previous marriage, but those bright brown eyes mark her unmistakably as Pete's daughter. Vivian, laughing, flutters her hands at me too. I feel as if my heart is being squeezed and wave back to my tiny niece.

I hand the bouquet to Charlotte and follow the newlyweds along the aisle. Pete's best man, Toby, falls in beside me and we roll our eyes at each other in relief. He murmurs, 'Dear God, I need champagne.' He's had a long day too.

It's May 1937 and chilly in the spring sunlight. We arrange ourselves for photos, then climb into cars and return to Pete's farmhouse for a wedding breakfast. Toby delivers a witty speech, although twice he comes perilously close to mentioning Pete's previous love, Billie.

We toast the happy couple and eat. Seated to my right is Charlotte's father, Professor Otto Fischer, as burly, bearded and committed as Karl Marx. On my left is Harry, Charlotte's ex-husband, grey-eyed behind his gold-rimmed glasses. Now and then he strokes my thigh

deliciously beneath the table.

As I argue with Toby about who's had the most exhausting day (I win), I notice Harry and Professor Fischer are deep in worried, private conversation. I know it's not about the wedding.

Once Charlotte was my friend, and I tried earnestly not to fall into Harry's arms. But a year ago I did, and high time too — Charlotte was already pregnant to Pete. But she was terrified of the scandal of divorce and refused to let her marriage go: until the birth of baby Vivian gave her the courage.

So Harry and I went to a hotel and expressed amazement when the detective burst into our unlocked room, and the divorce came through in six months. Since then Charlotte and I have rebuilt a wary friendship, based mainly upon my love for small Vivian and Charlotte's love of ordering me around.

That evening, when the newlyweds have retired and only a few close friends remain, we dance in the sitting room to the gramophone. It's great fun, especially when the avant-garde gang — Toby, Stefan, Klara and Sofia — do the Charleston, now absurdly outdated.

Then Stef and Toby sit down at the piano, their heads together, laughing and playing snippets of Noel Coward songs, and pale Klara waltzes, her eyes closed, in the arms of red-lipped Sofia.

Later, Stefan and I dance too, his slim body pleasingly familiar. We were lovers once, until he realised Toby meant more to him than any woman could. It was a painful time, eased now by new happiness: this marriage and baby Vivian and of course, Charlotte's ex-husband.

Stef goes to the kitchen for more champagne, refills our glasses, then stands at the gramophone chatting to Harry about the music. I gaze at them both, such fine-looking men, and smile to myself.

Harry and I survived these long years of believing we could never be together, and now at last we are. A waltz begins and we dance. He nuzzles my neck, and I caress his back in a place I know brings him particular pleasure. Then we go upstairs to bed.

Lying sated and content, Harry murmurs, 'Did you miss Billie today?'

I kiss his warm shoulder. 'Terribly. She should have been here



despite everything.’

‘Jealous of Charlotte, perhaps?’

‘Doubt it,’ I say. ‘Remember it was Billie who left Pete.’

‘Where did you say she was living now?’

‘All over the place really, wherever the aerial circus is performing,’ I say. ‘Poor thing.’

‘I suppose she’d still prefer to be teaching RAF recruits at Hamble aerodrome.’

I laugh. ‘The “snotty-nosed, public-school types”? Don’t think so.’ I roll onto my other side and Harry cuddles me from behind.

‘What were you and Otto Fischer talking about?’ I say. ‘You seemed rather intense.’

‘The civil war in Spain. He’s appalled at what’s happening.’

‘Oh, *matros*, surely it’ll work out somehow. You mustn’t worry.’

‘I try not to, but really, it’s unbelievable. A Fascist coup against an elected Republic, in *this* day and age?’ Harry sighs. ‘Otto wants Billie’s opinion on some planes his group would like to send to the Spanish government.’

‘Hope he doesn’t expect her to *fly* them. Why not ask Stef or Pete, they’re pilots too?’

‘They don’t have her experience with so many different old crates.’

I nod. ‘Well, she might need the work, she said the aerial display could be closing down soon. No one wants to see planes for fun any more — just reminds them of the Guernica bombings.’

‘And who could blame them?’ says Harry. ‘Anyway, I told Otto to speak to you in London. So sleep now, *jungman*. We’ve got cleaning up to do in the morning.’

‘It’s bloody Charlotte’s home now. She can clean up.’

‘Unlikely,’ he says. ‘Bet you she has a headache and everyone else has to do it.’

‘You terrible cynic. Anyone would think you know her well.’

‘Oh, far too well. I’d love to forget.’

I turn to face him, and stroke him slowly from nipple to belly to groin. ‘Again? I can do my best.’

‘Yes please, my darling.’

A week later I'm sitting on the small balcony of my flat in Bloomsbury, reading in the spring sunshine. I put the book down and gaze at the leafy garden square across the road, thinking about the wedding and my brother Pete.

He's resigned himself at last to his manager's job in an aircraft factory, and leaves his small plane stored at a nearby airfield. With all the demands of Charlotte and the baby he doesn't have time for flying.

I wonder how much he misses it. Or how much he misses Billie too.

Of course he adores Charlotte, most men do. She's wry and seductive and restless, while fierce Billie couldn't be more different. Pete used to call her a red-haired Amelia Earhart — a sarcastic, scowling Earhart.

He and Billie had planned their own aviation business, but Pete sabotaged everything by getting thrown out of flying school and flinging himself into Charlotte's arms.

Billie picked herself up and tutored for a time at Hamble (which welcomed the air-mindedness of the fair sex they said, yet took forever to provide any women's bathrooms), but finally even she couldn't bear the casual, constant prejudice any longer.

'Everyone loves a girl flyer, Lizzie,' she says. 'Except the boy flyers.'

Oh, *Billie*.

Just then the bell rings, and standing at the door is Charlotte's father, Professor Fischer. Though he and Harry have been friends for a long time, we've never spoken much before. I make us coffee and we go to sit out on the balcony.

'Miss McKee,' he says formally, 'Harry Bell has mentioned to you my request regarding Miss Quinn?'

'Yes, he did. But Professor Fischer, surely you don't expect Billie to fly aeroplanes in Spain?'

'No, not at all! And please call me Otto. I will take the liberty of addressing you as Eliza, since that is how Harry has spoken of you from his heart these many years.'

'Of course! I'm amused at the Professor's old-fashioned charm.'

'I must ask, Eliza, do you understand what has happened in Spain?'

I sip my coffee. 'Not really. I know civil war broke out last year after General Franco's right-wing rebels staged a coup against the

Republican government, but it's all been a bit confusing ever since.'

Otto leans forward, his eyebrows drawn. 'Then you should know, Eliza, if the rebels do defeat the Republic, Fascists all over Europe will believe they are invincible. Another war will almost certainly begin.'

'Oh, surely not, Otto.' I smile. 'This isn't the Middle Ages. An elected government should be able to crush some raggie-taggle rebels.'

'Eliza, those rebels are very powerful. They are supported by the richest landowners, the Catholic Church, the Italian Fascist and German Nazi governments. Even our own conservative British rulers wish them well.'

'But aren't the Republicans supported too? I thought volunteers from around the world were helping them.'

'Indeed, but they *must* be volunteers — their own conservative countries loudly proclaim neutrality. Eliza, the rebels are powerful and wish us all to return to the Middle Ages. We must stop them now. Or soon it may be the Nazis we have to stop.'

'Oh.' My chest feels tight. 'I've read about them doing terrible things to their Jewish people.'

'Ja. Even my own family —' He swallows. 'Now. I work with a committee that wishes to send old aircraft to Spain for the air force. They are loyal to the Republic but do not have enough planes to fight the Condor Legion. You have heard of the Condor Legion?'

I nod. 'The German pilots who bombed Guernica.'

'Indeed. War should take place on battlefields, or so civilised people have always assumed. It should not descend from the sky onto market-towns full of innocent people. Now there is nothing to stop such a thing happening everywhere. Even here in quiet London.'

Bombs here? I gaze at the sunny garden square and shiver.

'Our committee has located some unregistered planes, but we have no idea if they are airworthy, and their owners want a lot of money for them. So Miss Quinn could help us decide if we should buy them.'

'But how would you get them to Spain?' I say. 'Aren't all the ports blockaded?'

'We can ferry them legally to France, then,' Otto shrugs, 'not quite so legally into Spain. The Republican pilots would do the fighting and your friend would not be involved in the slightest. Of course we would

pay for her advice.'

'Well, Billie's still touring, but I'll give you the number for head office. After that it's her you'll have to convince, and she has no interest in politics.'

'Ah, but she has interest in flying, and we all know the aerial circuses are finished. I doubt anyone needs persuading what extraordinary inventions aeroplanes have become,' he says drily.

He leans back and stretches a little. 'A good wedding last week, *ja*?'

I'm relieved to change to easier topics. 'You must be pleased Charlotte is so happy. And baby Vivian too —' I smile to myself.

'What joy she brings. The image of Charlotte's mother Ilse, gone these two years now,' he says, his eyes suddenly bright with tears. He clears his throat. 'Still, my work is a consolation.'

He looks around and sees my book on the table. He picks it up, puzzled, stroking his beard, and gazes at me from under his eyebrows. '*The American Black Chamber*?'

I laugh, a little shyly. 'I read anything that interests me.'

'Indeed. Cryptography interests you?'

'I've always loved mathematics — and in application like that it's fascinating.'

'For me too, of course,' he says slowly.

'But aren't you a professor of philosophy?'

'My philosophical research is based upon the concepts of the Vienna Circle, now of course devastated by the Nazis.' He sighs. 'But mathematics is essential to that work. Connected, in unexpected ways, to cryptography.'

He gazes at me for a moment and I think he's seeing me properly for the first time. He carefully puts down the book. 'When you have read this, Eliza — and only if you are interested of course — I have one or two introductory papers you might enjoy. I would be happy to discuss them, but they are highly confidential. Still, perhaps that is too much of an undertaking.'

'No, *no!*' I say. 'I'd love to see your papers, I'd *love* to talk about this, it's always fascinated me. But as a woman I've been told pretty often that such things are not open to me.'

'But now at this time, in this place,' he says, 'everything is open —

must be open — to all.’

We walk to the door and he shakes my hand. ‘I will send you the paper, Eliza, then let us talk. But please remember they are secret, for you only.’

‘Thank you. I’ll look forward to it, Otto.’

‘Of course, this is unconnected to your friend Billie Quinn, quite a different matter.’ He shrugs. ‘But perhaps not. Many things may help preserve civilisation in this increasingly gloomy world.’ Then he laughs sadly. ‘I am a romantic fool. Civilisation is already lost.’

I’m curious to see Otto’s papers, because lately I’ve been at rather a loose end. Harry is a doctor, a researcher in malaria, so the many and varied species of *Plasmodium* parasite are a common topic at our dining table. My own interests are odd too, but they don’t occupy me in the same way.

I run a small company for my grandmother in Australia, importing pearlshell from Broome for the jewellery trade. But recently overfishing has damaged the market, so business is quiet.

The other interest doesn’t demand much of my time either: it’s a shareholding in a cargo ship, *Inverley*, left to me by my late grandfather. But *Inverley* isn’t the usual sort of ship with an engine — she’s a massive steel windjammer, a four-masted barque.

There are very few of her kind left afloat nowadays, and if I mention them most people are puzzled. ‘Steel sailing ships?’ they say. ‘But aren’t those clippers or galleons or whatever, made out of wood and they race to China and back with tea ... or something?’

‘No,’ I say, ‘these are modern vessels, well, modern forty years ago — and they’re gigantic, hundreds of feet long. Only a dozen or so still exist and every year they bring the grain harvest from Australia to Europe. They’re owned and sailed mostly by the Finns.’

Usually at this stage, say at a party, people give me a look as if I’m teasing them and go to talk to somebody else. But I’m not teasing.

Square-rigged *Inverley* may be an anachronism in this era of engine-driven vessels, yet she certainly exists. And I love her. Eight years ago she brought me from Australia to England, and on our four-month

passage I was grudgingly permitted to work with the crew.

They rechristened me Elias, and under their rough tutelage I grew strong and confident and a little wiser in the ways of the world.

All the square-riggers are growing old now, and one by one going to the breakers, so I'm lucky to have known such a life. *Inverley* is the wellspring of my happiest memories.

And of course I love her most of all because Harry and I first became friends upon her deck.

True to his word, Otto sends me a large envelope by first class mail with three of his papers. The formal language is intimidating but, little by little, the logic unfolds, along with a surprising sense of beauty. I also buy a textbook he suggests will help, and slowly this new world draws me in.

We meet every few weeks for a chat over coffee, and Otto guides me towards what he calls the wider view. Not only of the work itself but how it's applied in real life: especially in the intelligence services, about which he seems to know a surprising amount as well.

Conversations with Harry at our dining table about *Plasmodium* research are now interspersed with my excited insights into the realm of codes and cryptography. I read at my desk when it rains and out on my balcony in good weather, and sometimes I look across to the trees in the garden square and feel utterly content and absorbed.

It never occurs to me to wonder where this fascination will lead.

I don't ask myself why Otto is being so helpful, why he is clearing a path before me, a confidential path, one I would never have discovered for myself.

I don't question what it might mean for me, or Billie, or Harry.

The Great War passed so long ago it's easy to assume today's peace will last forever. I cannot for a moment imagine these sunny days will pass, and soon an eyewall of thunderclouds will slowly engulf the sky.

I cannot imagine, either, how carelessly I will stray into that stormfront.

Perhaps some things are beyond imagination.

## 2. Billie: Kites in Spain

*Miami, Saturday, 31 May 1937: Mrs. Amelia Earhart Putnam announced tonight she hopes to restart her world flight tomorrow. Noonan, who will act as navigator, will accompany her on the entire journey. She will fly to South America and then across the Atlantic and the Channel to Aden, Karachi, Darwin, Lae, Howland, Honolulu and from thence to Oakland, California.*

I put down the newspaper and sigh. Lucky cow, wish it were me instead. Pete always said I was like Earhart, but she's calm and patient and good natured — I'm just a cranky bitch, as Pete wasn't too slow to point out, either.

I look up and realise there's someone hovering at the opening to my tent. Wilfred Bettany. I really don't want to deal with his anxious politeness — polite anxiety? — this afternoon.

Sometimes I think I should take out a newspaper advertisement: *Miss Billie Quinn would like to apologise to all the men of Planet Earth for making them nervous because she can fly aeroplanes better than they can.*

'Ahem, Miss Quinn?' he says, taking off his hat.

'Hello, Wilf. What's up?'

'The meeting, Miss Quinn, remember? Major Stott's come from London to address us.'

'Reckon he's got good news, Wilf?'

'Doubt it.'

We walk together to the large tent where everyone else is assembling. Wilf's not that bad really, but I've told him often enough not to call me Miss Quinn. If he didn't annoy me so much, he'd be almost attractive in a puppy-dog sort of way.

We move towards the rear of the tent as the Major stands up to speak. He took over the business a couple of years ago, but unfortunately it was when the novelty of human flight was wearing off and the unpleasant reality of aerial warfare was emerging.

Not a good time to try to charm the paying public with a flying circus, but at least he doesn't beat around the bush. Tight economic conditions, blah blah, poor weather, blah blah, reduced takings, blah blah. Terribly sorry, old chaps. When you finish today it's for good. Thank you.

'Do you think we'll get paid out for the month?' says Wilf as we leave the tent, everyone murmuring around us.

'I'll be surprised if we get paid out for the week.'

'Will you be all right, Miss Quinn? What will you do?'

'No idea, Wilf. And for Christ's sake call me Billie. What about you?'

He shakes his head. 'Family's disowned me and I never finished my studies. Not many civilian aviation jobs around now.'

'Air Force?'

'Well, it's a pay-packet. And they're desperate for men —'

'Not much use to me, then.'

He grins. 'Suppose not. Couldn't have girls —' He goes red. 'Sorry.'

Something simmers over, as it does all too often nowadays. 'You know how many women hold pilot's licences in England now, Wilf? Close to *two hundred*. You don't reckon there's a few of them might be some use in the air? Especially if ... when ...'

I run out of steam.

Wilf gazes at me. 'I'll be sorry not to see you every day, Billie.'

'Yeah.' I'm surprised to find myself thinking *me too*.

'Will you come to the pub with us later? I know you usually don't, but it's the last night.'

I shrug. 'Maybe.' He smiles and I think, okay. Nice skin, broad shoulders, slim hips. And I'll never see him again after this. Why not?

Wilf goes to check his plane. I can see people already lining up for tickets at the gate, even though the afternoon show doesn't start for an hour. Maybe they've heard this is going to be the last one.

As I get to my tent I'm surprised to see a large bearded man in an overcoat waiting by the entry. He takes off his hat as I approach, and steps forward.

'Miss Quinn?'



‘No, Queen of bloody Sheba.’

He smiles politely. What an utter shit I’ve become.

‘Sorry. Force of habit. And you are —?’

‘Professor Fischer, Otto. You would know of me as Charlotte’s father.’

‘Oh, okay. How did the wedding go?’

‘It was very pleasant. I was sorry not to see you there, but I was able to prevail upon Miss Eliza McKee to help me track you down.’

To my amusement I’d been sent an invitation to the wedding. I’d ripped it up, not out of pique, I just couldn’t be bothered to go. After all, Pete didn’t dump me for Charlotte — it was me who left him after he stupidly threw away all our years of hard work.

I don’t even hate Charlotte either, although I’m perfectly aware of the barbed steel spine beneath all that sweet lushness. At my kindest, which isn’t very often, I sometimes pity her, though could never have said why.

She has Pete, she has their child, she apparently has everything she ever wanted. But I’ll be mildly curious to see if that’s enough for her in the years ahead.

And Charlotte did one good thing at least: she released poor Harry Bell from their bitter shell of a marriage and made Lizzie’s life complete. My dear friend Lizzie, who has her own spine of steel, but hers is flexible and far from barbed.

‘Miss Quinn?’

‘Sorry. Just thinking how delightful the wedding must have been.’

To my surprise he says wryly, ‘I rather doubt that,’ and I can’t help but grin.

We sit on folding stools in my tent and he says, ‘As I explained to Eliza, we hope to buy several aircraft to send to the Republicans in Spain, but we need a professional opinion on their airworthiness. It must be confidential of course, as it is technically against the law. The Non-Intervention Committee has some very peculiar ideas, and we prefer not to attract their attention.’

‘The Non-who?’

‘A government body preventing anyone sending arms to Spain, but in reality stopping only those who would aid the Republicans. No such restrictions hinder Fascists in their support of the Nationalists.’

‘Okay. And the Nationalists would be —?’

He smiles kindly. ‘The rebels who carried out a military coup against the elected Republican government.’

‘Oh, the baddies.’

He stops smiling. ‘In any war both sides may behave culpably, but yes, there have been extraordinary barbarities ...’ His jaw clenches. ‘Yes, the baddies. And if they win, German aggression will be unstoppable. You would know that many British volunteers — soldiers, nurses, drivers — have already joined the International Brigades to support the Republicans.’

‘Not really, I only read the aviation news. So why do the Republicans want these old kites?’

‘The Spanish air force is loyal, but the pilots are poorly-trained and have few working planes.’

‘Poorly-trained?’ I say slowly. ‘Well, I need a job and I’m a qualified instructor.’

‘Spain is a war front, Miss Quinn, not suitable for —’

‘I think that’s for me to decide, Otto.’

‘Ah.’ He hesitates. ‘Certainly, a number of foreign airmen were hired last year to help protect Madrid. They did well, although most have now left, forbidden by their own countries to take part.’

‘Hired? What were they paid?’

‘I believe it was something like two hundred pounds a month.’

‘That’s pretty good. What would they pay for a flight instructor, do you reckon?’

‘I do not know.’ He frowns in concern. ‘Miss Quinn —’

‘Call me Billie, for Christ’s sake.’

‘Billie, please understand that half the country is now held by the Nationalists, and they are ruthless and very well armed. And by ‘ruthless’ I mean they visit atrocities upon civilians on an almost inconceivable scale. Women especially are targeted for —’

He stops and rubs his face with both hands, his eyes sad. ‘Spain is not a place for innocents of any kind, Billie. Political or personal.’

‘I’m thirty years old, Otto, and I’ve worked with men as an equal since I was seventeen.’ I shrug. ‘Okay, maybe I’m a political innocent but I’m not interested in all that argy-bargy.’ I lean forward. ‘I just

need work, this job's finished. Why shouldn't I train Republican flyers?

'The Russians are setting up a school at the moment to instruct Spanish pilots, so the job would not last for long — months at most.'

'Any paid work suits me. Those Russian planes are mainly Polikarpov I-15s and I-16s, aren't they? I've flown an I-5, it's a good bird.'

'I have no idea at all about those machines. It is why I am here in the first place.'

'Come on, Otto, I need a job. Do it for the Revolution.'

He closes his eyes. 'Billie, it is the legally elected *government* we are supporting.'

'Oh that's right, it's the baddies who are doing the revolution.'

'Indeed it is.' He sighs. 'Very well. I will enquire.'

'Great. Now, those planes you wanted me to check, what are they?'

He gets a notebook out of his coat and shows me a list of names, and I have to smile.

'Sorry, Otto, I don't need to see any of these. If even one of them could get off the ground I'd be surprised. They were slow and obsolete twenty years ago. You'd be wasting your money.'

One of the assistant riggers calls from outside the tent, 'Final checks, Miss Quinn. Don't be late.'

'All right,' I say, scribbling on a page of the notebook. 'Here's my phone number in London. Ring me when you know more.'

Miss Billie's Daredevil Handkerchief Stunt goes off as usual, but I can't say I'm sorry it's for the last time. Swooping past the crowd in a Tiger Moth and hooking a hanky off the ground with one wing may not be quite as terrifying as it looks, but getting it wrong would leave a large and bloody hole in the ground.

Afterwards I help strip down the planes and load them into the trucks. Everyone's subdued but careful, as always. There'll be plenty of work ahead for the mechanics and riggers and pilots — the Royal Air Force can't get enough men — but the women who sell the tickets and cook and keep the whole shebang ticking over don't have any such guarantees, and I see a few red eyes.

By evening it's all over. The sleeping and mess tents will stay till tomorrow but everything else is packed. I go to my tent, have a quick wash and change, then head along the path through the wheatfield to the pub.

The other pilots are already sitting around a table in the courtyard, so I get half a pint and sit beside Wilf, who goes red. The pilots are pretty easy company. They gave me some shit at first but we've learnt to get along.

There was one creep who thought I'd fall into his bed with a sob of gratitude, but I enlightened him. He departed a few months ago, still sulking, but at least he never touched me again.

Night falls and most people leave for their tents — it'll be an early day tomorrow. Finally it's just me and dear old Wilf, who's run out of conversational gambits and has a faint air of desperation.

'Would you mind escorting me back through the field?' I ask, as if I haven't safely negotiated paths through fields and lanes to our campsites for months. He nods, speechless.

We set off in the dark but luckily Wilf's brought a torch. Half-way back I stop and look up to the sky.

It was hazy earlier, but now there's a quarter-moon and the stars are brilliant in the mild night air. I love them, even though these northern skies aren't nearly as beautiful as those of my Western Australian childhood.

'Switch off the torch, Wilf. I can't see properly.'

He does so, and after a time gazing upwards I turn to him, and step close and put my hands on his shoulders. I rest my head lightly on his shoulder too, surprised at how tired — of just about everything — I suddenly feel.

But he smells of young, healthy male and I nuzzle his cheek and nibble my way to his nicely-shaped mouth, and he obliges me with a kiss that's rather more pleasingly experienced than I'd expected. I tilt my head back and smile at him in the faint moonlight.

'Billie,' he says, breathing deeply. 'God, that's ...'

I take his hand and draw him away from the path and we sit down among the soft green wheat. He puts his arms around me and kisses me again, as delightfully as the first time.

I suddenly regret I didn't try this with him before, but it wouldn't have been wise in the gossipy world of the aerial circus. But tomorrow we're going in different directions.

He leans over me, and I reach up to his amazed face and bring his mouth to mine again. I guide his fingers to my buttons and he opens them and I shrug off my shirt. I'm so slim I usually wear just a camisole beneath and, as he pulls it off and his tongue finds my aching nipples, that seems a particularly good idea.

I groan and his mouth comes back to mine and his hands are doing marvellous things — everywhere — but the rest of my bloody clothes are getting in the way.

I undo my trousers and kick them off, along with my knickers and shoes, and don't even have to suggest to Wilf he does the same. Efficient lad, I think, as the stars waver above us and stalks of wheat slide smooth against my back.

Exquisitely, wickedly naked to the air, I wrap my thighs around his hips and pull him deep into me: then I don't notice the stars above or anything else. I haven't had a man in quite a while, so it's not very long before I'm arching in pleasure, waves throbbing through me, softening and glowing and easing away.

Wilf comes too, hot on my belly, then we doze for a few moments.

He wakes, cups my face and whispers, 'Oh, *Billie* —'

I put my hand on his mouth. 'Shh. We'd better get back before anyone notices.'

We dress, Wilf finds his torch, and we walk calmly back to the camp. No one is about so I kiss him quickly and push him towards his tent. He goes to say something and I shake my head.

'Night, Wilf.'

Next morning he's shy and pleased, but I'm glad to see there's no swaggering or significant looks.

At the breakfast table the chat is of future prospects. Ours was the last of the civilian flying displays and now only the RAF, with its promises of power and protection, draws the crowds.

'What you going to do then, Billie?' asks one of the mechanics.

I shrug. 'Might be getting work in Spain, training pilots for the Republicans.'

'Who, the *Reds*?' says a man named Jones. 'Better get paid in advance. Haven't got a hope — the Krauts and Wops are walloping them.'

'They're not *Reds*,' says Wilf, surprising me. 'They're the government, elected to modernise the place and bring in some of the freedoms we all take for granted.'

'Ha! Fellow traveller over here, boys,' says Jones. 'Give it up, Wilf, they're just *Commies*, and the Krauts'll show 'em what for.'

'And then?' asks Wilf. 'They'll try to show us what for as well.'

'Doesn't matter — we've got the RAF,' says another pilot proudly.

The head mechanic says, 'Don't be so confident, laddie. The Germans are miles ahead of us, *miles*. Christ, what I'd give to get my hands on one of those Messerschmidts.' He grimaces. 'But Jones is right, the Republicans don't stand a chance. Trying to take on the Condor Legion with a few old kites?'

'Well, not me personally,' I say. 'But if they'll pay me to teach them flying, why would I turn down the job? Not much else available.'

'Maybe they'll start up a women's RAF just for you, Billie,' says someone, snorting with laughter and the others join in.

I grin, but oh, how sick I am of the same old jokes.

I know I can outfly any of these smug bastards, and I know they'll never acknowledge it. And they'll always have work handed to them on a plate, they'll always get the newest, sleekest birds.

And me? Clapped out old kites in Spain.

### 3. Toby: Whitfield Street

Stefan drives us back to London. I'm tired, but mainly glad that ghastly wedding's over. Poor old Pete was terrified something would go wrong at the last minute (which it has fairly often in the dear boy's life), but now at last he's happy. Even the terrifying Charlotte seemed content, and she's never been what you'd call a serene soul.

Klara is beside me in the rear seat and she dozes, her head on my shoulder. I gaze at Stef and Sofia in the front.

They're cousins, two peas in a pod as they say, both dark-haired and green-eyed; although Sofia is buxom while my love is slim and entirely beautiful under his well-cut clothes. Their mothers were the Naughty Diamant Twins, dancers who came from Poland at the turn of the century and found themselves generous and compliant husbands.

I suppose we're really rather a mixed bunch. Klara, slight and fair, is from Finland — I believe there was a brief marriage to some oaf in Cambridge, then she met Sofia and that was that.

Me? I'm the mundane one. Tall, blond, English, and my accent as anonymous as I can make it.

I watch the trees flickering past the window and return to thinking, what *will* I do about that bloody house? My darling old aunt Maude died recently and bequeathed me her London terrace in the bohemian district of Fitzrovia. Some might rejoice at their good fortune, but I used to visit her in the ghastly old pile and my heart sinks.

The Depression may be easing off but it's left a lot of good property going for pennies. It would be hard to even give the house away right now, let alone find a willing purchaser — it's shabby and Victorian and hopelessly unfashionable.

In any case I know Maude wanted it to stay in the family. She was always kind to me, even paid for my education, so I do owe her that, and it's not as if Stef and I couldn't do with a bit more space.

My desk is in a corner of the sitting room in our small flat and, although he says it doesn't bother him, my tapping on the typewriter

must be irritating. But I've got to get a manuscript to the publishers in the next few weeks so I simply can't avoid it.

Maude's place has four storeys plus an attic and cellar. It might be possible for us to live on a couple of floors, but the cold, decrepit remainder? Rent it out perhaps? That could be tricky. I'd have to do it up and I'm not very handy that way.

Tricky in other ways too — who would we share the house with? There are rather a lot of loud and unpleasant individuals out there who'd love to see me and Stef in gaol simply for being who we are. Even at our current lodgings we have to be ludicrously discreet, yet the landlord is still spitefully watchful.

I say lightly, 'Sofia, want to live in my rotting inheritance?'

'What would the rent be, dear one?'

'Only joking, blossom. I wouldn't impose that slum on anyone.'

Sofia turns around. 'No, honestly, Toby. I've been to your aunt's — remember when we took her a hamper last Christmas? It's not that bad. And our landlady has just given me and Klara notice.'

'Why?'

'You know why. For being us, despite always paying our rent on time and putting up for years with her ghastly cats.'

Beside me Klara murmurs, 'And the minister wants my printing press out of the church cellar. Your new house has a cellar?'

'It's not a *new* house, Klara, it's a horrible, disgusting old one. And you'd have to clean it and paint it and repair it —'

'We could do that,' says Sofia.

She's correct. Unlike me, they both maintain their surroundings simply and competently.

'Tell you what, old chums,' I say, laughing. 'You do the repairs around the place and you can have a floor to yourselves for free.'

'I want the cellar for my press,' says Klara sleepily. 'And an attic room for a study.'

'You drive a hard bargain, darling. God knows, I had plans to bury bodies in that cellar, but if it's what you want —'

Klara sits up and claps her hands. 'Toby, that would be excellent indeed.'

'Are you serious? Stef, what do you think?'



He keeps his gaze on the road and nods. 'It's rather a good idea, Toby — could protect all of us.'

Sofia says, 'Of course. Two men, two women. As far as the busybodies are concerned that's how it's supposed to be. Our real lives can remain our own business.'

'I suppose it *could* be something of a haven,' I say doubtfully.

'Plenty of space, too,' says Sofia. 'I desperately need a rehearsal studio with good acoustics. One of those big empty rooms would be perfect.'

'Are you sure?' I say. 'You do realise how much work it needs?'

'Ha!' says Klara confidently.

She's rather less confident the day we go to see the house in Whitfield Street: a vulgar Victorian interloper in a row of elegant Georgian residences. The rain doesn't help much, but even a sunny day wouldn't flatter the garish red bricks beneath their layers of London soot.

I unlock the front door and a dreadful smell hits us in the face.

'Just needs an airing,' says Sofia briskly. She looks into the front room and says less briskly, 'Oh God, poor decomposing beastie. Those rugs'll have to go, *then* an airing will work wonders.'

Downstairs the walls of the two reception rooms are covered in acres of printed brown agapanthus, and at the rear is an old-fashioned kitchen and bathroom. Being careful not to catch our feet in the worn runner, we climb the staircase to the first floor. It has a sitting room, two bedrooms and its own small kitchen and bathroom.

'This was where my aunt lived,' I say. 'She was converting the upstairs floors into flats to rent out, but became unwell and stopped. So they weren't finished off, although the basics are there.'

'It might do us rather nicely, Toby,' says Stef. 'What do you think?'

I have to agree. Maude's rooms are musty-smelling but not in bad condition, and they also have a few good sticks of antique furniture. We climb the next flight to the second storey, laid out like the first, but needing a little more work to make it livable.

'One of these rooms would make a good music studio,' says Sofia.

Klara says, 'I like this place, Toby, but I still want a study in the attic

to look out at the sky.’

‘Let’s hope the roof is sound, poppet, or you’ll be closer to the sky than you might prefer.’

‘Really, the whole place does have potential,’ says Stefan slowly.

‘If you overlook the squalor,’ I say as we reach the third floor, where we stand, astonished at the mess. I shudder and say, ‘Beyond redemption,’ and the others murmur in agreement.

Klara dashes up the last flight of stairs to the attic. She calls out, ‘There is a very good view over the rooftops and I do not see the sky through the ceiling. I think I will have my attic, Toby.’

‘It’s not bad, you know,’ says Stefan. ‘The mould is only superficial.’

‘Hopefully.’ I shrug. ‘All right, let’s have a think about how on earth we might do this.’

Aunt Maude left me some money and I have a small income from my books, Stefan is gainfully employed, and Sofia plays her cello in elegant hotels. Klara is perhaps the least prosperous, but still manages to get by, selling her hand-printed volumes of poetry to devotees and bookshops.

None of us is as poor as perhaps it sounds, but we’re all in our late twenties and certainly don’t want to ask our parents for help. And while Stefan and Sofia’s families are well off, Klara’s are rather less so.

And mine, I always fib, are long since departed.

Sofia and Klara start on the house immediately and we hire a man to help them. They labour happily at Whitfield Street throughout the rest of that long summer, while I argue with my publisher’s copy-editor and wrestle with successive drafts of my manuscript.

This is my first novel, a light-hearted detective story. My two earlier works were non-fiction, based upon my travels in the Middle East as a wide-eyed innocent. They were well-received, even garnered small literary prizes, but I’m finding fiction rather harder to write.

It’s a relief to be able to skip the reference lists, but I’m not a slap-dash author and even fiction, no matter how light-hearted, still needs research. I sometimes discuss my female characters with Eliza, although she’s such an odd little thing I’m not certain she’s a reliable

exemplar of womanhood.

She laughs when I say that, and insists females are very different from each other, and most of them want more than marriage and babies in their lives. That's not what the ladies' journals tell me and Eliza herself can hardly talk: she's absurdly fond of babies, and marriage to gorgeous Harry is certainly on the cards.

But her women friends certainly sound like a rum lot, especially Billie, the girl flyer. I'd love to meet her one day, although she does sound rather fearsome.

Stefan is a pilot too, and an engineer at an aircraft factory. He's also a member of the RAF Reserve, but I'm not quite certain what that entails, apart from him having to attend dull lectures or go away on aviation courses.

Lately he's been bored with his work, and speaks longingly of the Supermarine works at Southampton where they turn out those new Spitfire planes. That's where Eliza's brother Pete works too, and when they get together it's as if they're speaking a foreign language.

Pete used to share my flat. I took him in when flygirl Billie decided she'd had enough of him, and it was there he finally fell prey to Charlotte's sheathed claws. Pete used to feel sorry for me because I'd never bring girls home, but I didn't have the faintest idea how innocent he was until he tried to pair me off with Sofia and/or Klara.

I had to break it to him gently they had no interest in me and equally, I had no interest in anyone but the man I'd loved hopelessly for a decade. At that, he nearly ran terrified for the hills. But then he decided being part of our little avant-garde gang made him a sophisticated chappie of the world: dear old Farmer Pete.

By then I'd long given up any hope of Stefan. I still had lovers of course, I won't pretend that men don't find me attractive.

And I'd go cottaging when lust became too much, despite the astonishing hypocrisy of the law: peers of the realm soliciting in dark corners, judges taking their pleasures in parks, and most infuriating, members of Parliament condemning us all as monsters then creeping out at night for blow-jobs.

Of course it's part of everyday life for a queer man in modern England: terror that the next moment of joy might also mean the

pantomime of arrest for *persistently importuning*, the condemnation of court, the brute violence of prison. I know poor chaps who've been flung into gaol, and afterwards were denied jobs or places to live.

Still, there's nothing I can do to change society or myself. I've loved Stef since we were at school, and when he fell for other boys I accepted it, and when he played with women I pretended not to care.

In fact I like women, but to me they're an interesting, separate species — I could no more want to make love to one than, say, to a friendly zebra.

Yet Stef has always yearned to fit in, and when he began a relationship with Eliza a few years ago I truly hoped he'd be happy. In the end he couldn't keep pretending to an orthodoxy he didn't feel, and he turned, thank God, to me at last.

The house at Whitfield Street is livable by November 1937, the agapanthus wallpaper gone, the ceilings painted and floors waxed, the lights repaired and chimneys swept.

By some miracle of modern plumbing we have working kitchens and bathrooms on each floor. We fit a new runner to the staircase and Stef's parents give us a few old Turkish rugs for the living areas.

Moving in is hard work, but Pete drives to London with his farm truck and, with Eliza and Harry's help, we manage to shift all our books and clothes and beds and desks and wardrobes, even Sofia's fragile cello and Klara's *infernally* heavy printing-press.

At the end of that long day I'm in Aunt Maude's old bedroom unpacking some of our things, and notice an object wrapped in brown paper at the back of the wardrobe.

I undo it and discover a framed oil painting, a portrait of Maude as a young woman, her blue eyes brimming with laughter, blonde hair in a loose knot, a gauzy wrap around her bare shoulders.

Until I was eleven I didn't know my aunt very well, but then she'd visit me at my boarding school, a quiet presence overshadowed by her glum banker husband.

When the husband died a few years later Maude blossomed in an endearingly eccentric way and I became very fond of her. I can barely

recall my own mother, so Maude was always the most important female in my life. I'm gazing, charmed, at the portrait when Stef comes in with another suitcase.

'Remember Aunt Maude?' I say. 'She'd visit our school on open days.' 'Vaguely. That's rather a good painting though, isn't it?'

We take the canvas downstairs and hang it above the fireplace in the sitting room. Klara says solemnly, 'To have Aunt Maude up there is like thanking her for this house.'

'It's *perfect*, Toby,' says Sofia, stepping forward to level the frame slightly. 'She's so like you, especially around the eyes.'

'Well, my mother's sister, after all.'

'Did your mother look like Maude?' asks Klara.

'No idea, poppet. She died when I was very young.'

'But don't you have a photograph?'

'Sorry, no.' I quickly change the subject. 'Who's for a cup of tea?'

By Sunday evening the move is done and Stef and I return to our old lodgings to give the nasty little landlord his key. We wait in the hall until he shuffles to his door, then he rudely snatches the key from my hand. I'm tired and have had more than enough by then.

'By the way, you old bastard,' I say. 'Here's what you've been hoping to see all these years.' I kiss Stefan slowly and pleurably.

The landlord's eyes bulge. He says, 'You *perverts*, how dare you?'

'Oh, we dare, and I bet you wish you did too, darling. Can't keep it hidden forever, you know.'

As we leave Stef murmurs, 'You don't really think he's secretly queer, do you?'

'I always thought he was just a little *too* fascinated by our every move. I expect we've made his day.'

Laughing, we saunter down the road to catch the underground back to our new home. Our haven. Whitfield Street.

## 4. Eliza: Man's Work

Toby and the avant-garde gang's new place isn't far from my flat in Bloomsbury, so Harry and I walk over to Whitfield Street for the house-warming party. It's a crisp winter evening in late 1937, and under my coat I'm wearing the crimson velvet dress I bought when my aunt Izabel had her big break playing the lead in *West End Winnie*, seven years ago.

Reminded, I say, 'Oh, I had a letter from Izabel today.'

'Is she finding Hong Kong any easier now?' asks Harry.

'At last, yes. She's teaching dramatic arts to the English children, and there's less talk about the disgusting streets and more about the kids she likes.' I think for a moment. 'That's interesting — one of them's named Nancy Kuan. Perhaps she's teaching Chinese children too.'

'Can't imagine the British — or Felix — being too happy about that.'

'I doubt that would bother Izabel.'

We smile. Izabel is my father's much younger half-sibling. She's only seven years older than me so she's more of a melodramatic big sister than an aunt. Her own father was Portuguese and her mother Min-lu — my grandmother — is Chinese.

Nanna is an educated, perfectly-spoken businesswoman, but in the eyes of the world my small clever grandmother is just a Chink. This of course means that my father and Izabel are what used to be called half-caste: today, more politely termed Eurasian.

When Izabel was a famous actress she told everyone her mother was dead, while her real mother was forced to play the role of her faithful old nanny. That was cruel to Min-lu but, when the deception was revealed, it was cruellest of all to Izabel.

We arrive at Whitfield Street and Sofia flings open the door. A rose is tucked into her dark curls and she's wearing a red flounced Spanish dress and dance shoes.

She clatters her heels noisily and says, 'Welcome, you two — *olé!*'

Harry says, laughing, 'I didn't realise it was a costume party.'

'It's not, dear one, I just felt like dressing up,' says Sofia, kissing us. 'Come and get a drink.'

We move through the crowded hall, greeting friends. In the sitting room a fire is blazing in the hearth and Klara is passing around a tray of drinks. She's dressed in pale blue chiffon fluttering in layers to the floor, her silver-fair hair loose down her back.

Harry says, 'Come on, Klara, it really is a costume party isn't it? You're the fairy at the bottom of the garden!'

She laughs. 'Harry, I will have you know this was my mother's wedding dress. Now, let me show you all the wonderful things we have done here.'

Manoeuvring around groups of people, she leads us up the stairs. On the first level, Stef and Toby are chatting to friends by the fire in their sitting room. After more greetings we admire the antique furniture, their prints of Venice, and Toby's new study, with his typewriter on the desk. 'Blessed peace at last,' says Stef, and he and Toby grin.

We follow Klara up another flight to the flat she shares with Sofia. Their sitting room has plump couches and bowls of flowers, and Sofia's cello rests beside a music stand. The fire here is banked, the air warm.

'Oh, how pretty,' I say. 'You must be so comfortable here, Klara.'

'We are indeed. But come now — there is someone in my study you will wish to greet.'

'Is that the study all the way up in the attic?' says Harry. 'Two more flights?'

'Come on, you poor old man,' Klara says. 'You can do it.'

Harry laughs and we keep going. At the top of the house we find an attic room with another cosy fire and Professor Otto Fischer seated in an armchair.

'Here is *Otto!*' announces Klara. 'He came upstairs to see my study and then he had to sit down for a very long time to get his breath back.'

Old friends Otto and Harry shake hands, and Otto says, 'Eliza, I must thank you for your assistance — I have spoken to Billie. Unfortunately our conversation did not go quite as I planned.'

'Wasn't she able to identify the planes for you?' asks Harry.

'Oh, in that she was most helpful.' He laughs ruefully. 'But after we discussed Spain, Billie decided she would take a job over there training Republican pilots.'

I sit down. 'Otto, how could you let her *do* that!'

'You know Billie well, Eliza. How could I possibly *stop* her?'

'Will she be in any danger?' says Harry.

'The training airfield is at Albacete, south-east of Madrid, and well behind the lines. It is the headquarters of the International Brigades and as safe as anywhere in the country.' Otto sighs. 'At least the work will not last long and she will be paid well. I think she should be safe.'

I nod. 'Heavens, I hope so.' I look around, and the window shows the night sky over the London rooftops, lights gleaming in the distance, outlining ranks of chimneys. Neat piles of paper sit on a desk and two full bookcases line the wall.

'My goodness, Klara, what a lovely place to work.'

'I am writing well here,' she says. 'I like it very much.'

'But I didn't know you and Otto were friends,' I say. 'Did you meet at Charlotte's wedding?'

'For the first time, but we have known of each other for years,' she says. 'We are distant cousins.'

'Cousins?' I laugh. 'You're not much alike.' Large Otto is bearish and dark-bearded, while Klara is slight and the fairest of blondes.

'I resemble my Finnish father,' says Klara, 'but my mother was German, from Otto's family.'

'Ah, we have confused you, Eliza,' says Otto lightly. 'Not all Jews are swarthy with hooked noses, you know.' There's understandable pain in his voice too: anti-Semitic venom is everywhere now, not just in Germany.

I say wryly, 'Is that the same way not all part-Chinese wear cheongsams, Otto?'

'Precisely,' he says, smiling. 'But you would still look most becoming in a cheongsam, Eliza.'

'You see, I do not practise religion,' says Klara, 'but I am Jewish nonetheless. In Germany I would no longer be a citizen or allowed to work in a profession.'



‘My God, has it gone *that far*?’ asks Harry.

‘Worse, my friend,’ says Otto. ‘It is now beyond my comprehension, and I could never be termed politically naive.’

‘But what are German Jews supposed to do?’ I say. ‘They can’t just leave — their homes and schools and jobs are in Germany.’

‘Many have fled, but many more remain. They simply cannot believe their dearest friends and trusted colleagues would ...’ Otto smiles sadly and shakes his head.

‘Some try to come here,’ says Klara, ‘but only the wealthiest and most educated are permitted entry. The poor have nowhere to go.’

Harry says, ‘Wasn’t a boat-load of children from Spain welcomed here a few months ago?’

‘The Basque refugees were permitted entry on a temporary basis, but I doubt you would call it welcomed,’ says Otto. ‘However, this sad talk is most unsuitable for a party — we should drink and be merry. I am rested now, Klara, so let us go downstairs and join the others.’

‘I’ve been meaning to ask, blossom,’ Toby says, refilling my glass. ‘Is your fabulous aunt Izabel making any films at the moment?’

‘No, she hasn’t done anything since *The Bride’s Secret* a few years ago.’

‘I simply don’t understand why that didn’t win her an Oscar. Of course Garbo’s wonderful, but Izabel *Malory*? There’s never been anyone like her. But why on earth isn’t she working?’

‘You know why, Toby. The scandal, remember?’

‘Oh, vaguely — something about her mother, wasn’t it? Surely quite forgotten by now.’

‘Newspapers never forget and never forgive. Remember those dreadful headlines about her Half-Caste Roots, her Tainted Blood, her Lewd Oriental Attractions?’

‘Oh, yes! The Depravity no Respectable Paper Could Bring Itself to Print? What was that?’

I laugh. ‘Probably the sin of keeping something a secret from them. But those hypocrites made a mint out of Izabel for years, especially when she married her “Barrister Beau”.’

‘So how *did* they find out in the end?’ says Toby.

‘Some gossip columnist did a hatchet job.’

‘Can’t have been a very well-hidden secret, then.’

‘No, Izabel had covered her tracks. She told everyone Min-lu was her old nanny and her real mother was dead. She’d also had some tiny, perfect touches of surgery on her eyes and nose. It was very plausible.’

‘So what went wrong?’

‘She was betrayed, Toby. By the Barrister Beau.’

‘Her husband?’

I nod. ‘Felix had the offer of a high-level job in Hong Kong but Izabel refused to go. He decided that sabotaging her career on the quiet would make her want to run away, and he was quite correct.’

‘But how on earth do you *know* all this, Eliza?’

‘She told me. Remember, her mother is my grandmother. We don’t have many secrets.’

‘Yet she still went to Hong Kong with that swine?’

‘Izabel is capable of a certain — self-persuasion. She thought she’d get over it.’

‘Did she?’ says Toby.

I sigh. ‘I don’t know.’

I remember Izabel, tears on her cheeks, saying, ‘Felix is my husband, Eliza. I love him and I know he loves me, despite all this. Indeed, I *shall* go to Hong Kong. I’ll have a *marvellous* time, I’ll make certain I do. Goodness, one day we’ll even be able to laugh about all this.’

‘*Laugh?*’

‘Of course, darling. Got to send the audience away with a smile.’

Brave, blinkered, actress Izabel. Always playing a role.

Towards the end of the party I sip a cup of tea in the sitting room and gaze at the portrait above the fireplace, a sweet-faced blonde woman from the turn of the century.

Klara told me earlier, ‘She is Toby’s Aunt Maude and the benefactor of us all. I believe she is the guiding spirit of this house.’ (I think at that point she’d had a bit too much to drink.)

Otto sits down beside me on the sofa. ‘Did you get the paper I sent last week, Eliza? An early work of Schlick, most influential. Poor man.’

‘I think I grasp it, but I need to read it again,’ I say. ‘Why is he a poor man?’

‘He was murdered last year, shot by a student who claimed his philosophy had undermined his *moral restraints*. In other words, Schlick was Jewish and he was a good Aryan. Then he said it was over a woman. All nonsense, but the Fascists loved it. The student was gaoled with a slap on the wrist and will soon be out.’ Otto smiles bitterly. ‘And poor old Schlick wasn’t even Jewish.’

‘How *terrible!* Did you work together?’

‘By correspondence. But my direction is more mathematical than the Vienna Circle’s, although their studies have been an invaluable foundation.’ He gazes at me. ‘You are truly enjoying those papers, Eliza? Most people would find them dull.’

‘Oh, never dull, Otto. Sometimes difficult but never dull.’

He says, in an offhand way, ‘Well, I suppose your great sailing ship and your grandmother’s company keep you busy and contented.’

‘Oddly, Min-lu has just decided to start winding up the company,’ I say. ‘The bottom’s fallen out of the pearlshell trade and it’s not worth holding on.’

‘And your ship?’

‘Things are only busy with *Inverley* when she’s laid-up for repairs in the summer. In fact, my life is surprisingly quiet at the moment.’

‘Ah.’ Otto changes the subject. ‘Of course you know your grandfather Freddy and I were once close friends, and Min-lu and I have kept up a correspondence ever since.’

‘Have you? I didn’t realise.’

‘Indeed. She wishes you to keep busy.’

‘I know that well enough,’ I say, laughing.

‘She says I should find you another job.’

‘Doing what?’ I say. ‘I hardly think philosophy’s my calling in life.’

‘Eliza, you have experience with languages and a great facility for mathematics, puzzles and patterns. Min-lu told me it was so and now I have seen it for myself.’

‘Honestly, Otto, what on earth would *that* make me useful for?’

‘GC&CS.’

I stare at him. ‘GC&CS? But — they don’t employ women.’

Four years ago, when Izabel's husband Felix was recruited into the Government Code and Cipher School, he told me firmly: *Dear child, this is man's work and they only hire ex-military or boffins. Girls'd be too busy filing their nails! But I'll keep you in mind if they need a typist.*

'Remember I said, Eliza, at this time, in this place, everything must be open to all. Yes, today GC&CS employ women. They employ anyone with true skills.'

Otto's bearded cheeks dimple. 'That, of course, is why your uncle Felix is in Hong Kong with a listening post, and not here in London.'

After we stop laughing he says, 'Shall I set up an interview for you?'

## 5. Izabel: Happy New Year

My God, Nancy Kuan's extraordinary — at eight I was a fat little thing who cried all the time, but this girl's got poise and beautiful extension. And that intense reserve: it's not shyness at all as I'd first thought.

When she lifts her eyes and starts speaking her lines I can feel her control and power and the hair on my neck lifts — and that doesn't happen very often with adult performers, let alone an eight-year old Eurasian in the dripping humidity of Hong Kong.

I wonder what her background is? Brown hair, straight nose, fair-skinned freckles. Some of the boys try to bully her but I've made my displeasure clear and they've stopped. I notice she's always accompanied by an old amah, with no European parent in evidence.

I light a cigarette while the little girls and boys squeal and chatter, putting on their shoes and street clothes in the dressing room. Amid the market clamour of vendors outside, and the many passers-by who would rather yell when they could simply speak, I hear someone clear his throat and spit luxuriously and I barely even shudder. Must be getting used to the place at last.

I go to the outer door as the amahs and mothers arrive to pick up their darlings. I see the English women glance shrewishly at Nancy Kuan and Elsie Chau and Eddie Tsang and think, Oh, you'd like your talentless spawn to attend the famous Malory Studio, would you? Then I'll teach whoever I want, you mean-minded bitches.

Felix hates it of course, says it hinders his career. I feel a pang of rage. A few little Chinese kids are hindering your career, darling? Try your own mulish stupidity for a start, or your petty bullying of the nice young soldiers who have to call you *sir*.

I wave at the departing spawn, and smile at the few children who make it worthwhile. Of course I'd love to be back in movies or on the stage, but I do like teaching. And sometimes I wonder: I'm thirty-seven now and perhaps it would have been harder than I ever imagined to stay at the top.

I hear a string of small fireworks go off in the street, crackle-crackle-crackle, as I close the door. Today is the thirtieth of January 1938, and tomorrow the Chinese New Year begins. An unsettling year of the Tiger is ahead of us — bold, aggressive, stubborn, unpredictable.

I shiver. God knows enough unsettling things are happening already.

Six years ago the Japanese invaded Chinese Manchuria to the north, and step by step they've encroached southwards. They took historic Peking last August, then the Chinese section of Shanghai fell in November after months of fighting — the International Quarter, of course, was allowed to remain untouched.

When they attacked the capital of Nanking, the spineless government of Chiang Kai-shek was forced to flee. Since then, the Japanese have been visiting atrocities on poor Nanking that beggar belief, yet Generalissimo Chiang, a strutting little dictator, still prefers to direct his enmity towards his fellow Chinese. He tells everyone the Americans will one day fight the Japanese and the true battle is with the Communists.

In fact, my uncle Bao-lim says, quietly and in private, the Reds have been the only forces resisting the invaders for years, and the Americans are still perfectly happy to keep selling arms to Japan in copious quantities.

He thinks I should know the truth because many people are deceiving themselves. When he says 'many people' he means Felix and the British, but he's too polite to say so — and cautious as well: Chiang's murderous spy network is everywhere.

I return to my office, reassuring myself that Nanking and Shanghai are eight hundred miles away, and Hong Kong, a neutral British possession, is perfectly safe.

But then, who knows what could happen in a Tiger year? So says Mrs Lau the cleaner, clever and cynical, who tells me often of her forebodings, interlaced with acid observations on some of the pupils' mothers that make me laugh.

I can hear her sweeping in the next room and call 'Mrs Lau?' She comes to the door, a thin widow in her fifties. I hand her a red envelope containing money to celebrate the New Year, and tell her to go home to her family to prepare for tonight.

I lie in my bath and idly soap my arms. On New Year's Eve all families come together for a special meal and tonight I'm going to Bao-lim's house. Tonight will be special for another reason: my mother Min-lu, Bao-lim's sister, will be here. I'm so happy at the thought of seeing her again — it must be a year since she last visited.

Her ship arrived from Perth earlier today and she's gone straight to Bao-lim's great house, half-way up the side of a mountain in an area they call the Mid-Levels. It's where the wealthier Chinese went to live after cool Victoria Peak itself was reserved for Europeans only.

I love going to Bao-Lim's house and have suggested we rent somewhere nearby, but Felix refuses to consider it, claiming he must stay in the city, close to his office in the Naval Dockyard. For him, no matter how pleasant the Mid-Levels, it's not European enough, and God forbid he be accused of going native.

I wonder if he'll put in an appearance tonight? He says he will but I doubt it: in the past the numbers of Felix's 'gyppy tummies' or 'security emergencies' that happen to coincide with events at Bao-lim's house would astonish any statistically inclined doctors. Or spies.

The Schiaparelli, I decide. It's a silk-satin gown in russet that flatters me — tonight is a special occasion after all. It's odd, but I rarely wear my most attractive dresses any more.

I suppose that's because, amazingly, I've lost my sense of desire, once such a fiercely pleasurable drive in my life. Now I feel dry and uninterested and wonder what all the fuss was about.

I remember when I told Eliza I'd go to Hong Kong with Felix, despite what he did, and make certain I had a wonderful time. She was astonished, and rightly so.

But I told myself I'd hit my mark: I'd play the happy, supportive, passionate wife until we returned to our old selves and I could feel my love for Felix again.

Of course, taking on the essence of a role is second nature to me. Even when bored or sad or unwell I can play any face, any posture, any mood, and be utterly convincing to the world. But it never occurred to me it would be myself I had to convince.

The first time Felix made love to me, the first time after I understood he'd betrayed me and destroyed everything in the world I valued, my body shuddered with loathing at his touch. Felix chose to interpret it as passion and plunged on regardless.

Now I shamelessly trot out all the shabby evasions — it's that time, darling; such a headache, darling; a bit sozzled, darling. He complies because he knows what a wound he inflicted — or some part of him knows, the clever mind, the charm I once loved: surely it *must*.

But how can I tell? It's gone, hidden beneath layers of smug certainty: the hallmark of the minor British official.

And now my body feels nothing for Felix. Nothing for any man.

In my russet silk, my hair a tumble of brunette waves to my shoulders, my face so perfectly made up there's no telling where the artifice begins, I gaze in the mirror and can almost believe my smile is real.

As a taxi carries me in the dark up the steep mountain road to Bao-lim's house I think, of course I'm happy. I'm comfortable enough playing Mrs Malory. I wake, I eat, I work, I sleep (I avoid my husband). A good life really, and better than most of those around me. At least I get enough to eat.

And tonight I'll see my loved ones, the people I used to deny. Eliza once said, 'What about you, Izabel, the real you? Min-lu's daughter —' 'She's Chinese,' I told her flatly. 'And I'm not. That's the real me.'

How wrong I was, Eliza, how absurdly wrong. Then I smile and think, don't take yourself so *seriously*, darling. It's a new year after all, and we're going to have a wonderful evening.

The car turns off the road down a driveway to the front of the house. The hillside falls away steeply here so the house's ornate swallowtail roof is almost level with the road above.

There are red celebration lanterns around the massive carved timber door where Bao-lim is standing, smiling, and we bow to each other. Beside him is my mother, a familiar neat figure in a cheongsam, and we greet and kiss and move into the house.

While Bao-lim's politics have always been a little radical, his house is in the traditional style. It's laid out around courtyards although,



unusually, he put the great reception room at the rear, not the centre. Its tall windows look north over the flickering lights of Victoria City, across the harbour to Kowloon and the Nine Dragons mountains beyond, a spectacular view.

I've arrived a little early to have time to talk to my mother. We sit down while Bao-lim goes to check what's happening in the kitchen, and a servant brings us fragrant tea.

'Darling child,' Min-lu says. 'How good to see you.'

'Oh, Mummy, you're looking wonderful,' I say, and it's true. She's just turned seventy-seven but her brown eyes are clear, her skin smooth, her white-streaked hair thick and swept up with the solid gold combs she always wears.

My father, Leo Peres, a Portuguese man from Macau, gave Min-lu those combs when my older sister Filipa and I were born. She'd been apart from my brother Sam's father for many years by then, and the marriage to Leo Peres was very happy, although sadly too brief.

He died when I was two and I can't remember him, although throughout my childhood (to bossy Filipa's scorn) I always pretended I could. Perhaps that's how my acting career began.

'Tell me everything, how is everyone?' I ask.

'Where do I begin?' Min-lu says laughing. 'Well, Filipa's bought a new stable just outside Perth for her horse-training business, and one of her mares won a big race recently.'

'How nice,' I say politely. Filipa and her silly nags!

'Lucy and Danny are marvellous — I had a holiday with them in Broome.' (My mother is very close to Eliza's aunt Lucy.) 'But Michael is off to university in Melbourne next year!'

'My God, it's been *that* long since Lucy had little Mikey?'

'And you, darling, how is it with you?'

I take a sip of tea. 'Well, the Malory Studio is doing very well — I'll have to get larger premises soon. I've got some good students too — one's a Eurasian girl, Nancy Kuan, who's simply compelling. I'm enjoying it so much.'

She lifts an eyebrow. 'Felix?'

'Puffed up with importance, running around telling people what to do. What can I say?'

‘Oh, *Izabel*!’ She squeezes my hand — she knows what Felix did. I told her and Eliza, no one else. Harry knows too of course, Eliza would never keep it from him, but I don’t mind that. He’s a kind man who tried to warn me about unreliable Felix long ago.

We look up as Bao-lim leads five elderly cousins from the mainland into the room, and we begin the polite rounds of family chit-chat required at New Year.

I’m glad my Hakka and Cantonese — both of which I refused to speak as a child — have improved so much with Bao-lim’s tutoring. He glances at me, proud of his Second Niece.

There’ll only be a few relatives here tonight, although Min-lu and Bao-lim were once part of a large family. My mother was the eldest, followed by four boys. She was unusually lucky because her father (a great admirer of Queen Victoria) allowed her a good education.

There is much I’ve come to love about the Chinese, but rather a lot to deplore in their treatment of women. Then again, life is fairly short and brutish for most Chinese men as well.

Three of my four uncles are dead — one who joined the Reds a decade ago, one who died of plague (yes, the medieval sort), and one, the youngest and quite apolitical, who was taken in Shanghai by Generalissimo Chiang’s secret police and never seen again.

Bao-lim leans towards me — I may be looking a little distracted — and says, ‘I have several other guests coming tonight, Second Niece, men from the university who have nowhere to go to for the new year. One of them has a child whom I believe attends your acting classes.’

Oh God, that could be awkward. Still, it’s kind of Bao-lim to open his house to people without family on this special night.

Just then a servant ushers in three men who gaze shyly around until my uncle jumps up and introduces them.

Two are students, unmemorable. The third, about my own age and wearing the sombre robes of an academic, teaches history says Bao-lim, but he doesn’t have to tell me his name.

I can see her face in his: the direct eyes, the well-formed bones, the long sensitive mouth, the poise, the power, the reserve.

‘Professor Laurence Kuan,’ says Bao-lim.

He is seated to my left at the table, an elderly cousin to the right. I ask my cousin about the harvest, the latest diseases of pigs, the need for rain, the many refugees fleeing from the Japanese; although I'm not quite certain what he says in return. I've often eaten here so I know the food must be delicious, but I can barely taste it.

Finally I can't avoid him. A new course is brought in and I turn politely and take a breath.

He forestalls me. 'I must thank you for being so kind to Nancy, Mrs Malory.'

'Kind? I'm not kind, Professor Kuan — most of the parents could tell you that.'

'Those with the talented children?'

'Those with the talentless, as I expect you know. No, I'm not kind to Nancy, she's just an extraordinary child. I've rarely seen such finely-controlled intensity. Has she always been like that?'

'Since she was small. I'd see her watching people, then later she'd copy their postures and gestures, emotions flitting across her face. She was mesmerising.'

I smile. 'I'm told I did that as a child too, but my sister says it was because I was a half-wit.'

'Clearly not.' He reaches out for his jasmine tea. His hand is golden and sinewy and male.

After a moment I say, 'You teach history, is that correct?'

He nods. 'I used to specialise in European history, but that can be unwise, especially when ... *some* are not happy with the British or Americans.' He means the Generalissimo, of course.

'What about Chinese history?'

He smiles. His teeth are even and beautiful. 'A minefield. Who knows if an emperor's tribulation of the past might unwisely predict a setback for a leader today? So now I research an obscure corner of Dutch exploration in the seventeenth century and hope that nobody notices.'

I laugh, but he's making light of something serious. Those in power dislike those who seek the truth, and many academics as apolitical as my mother's poor young brother have lost their careers, their health, their lives.

‘How did you meet Bao-lim?’ I ask.

A slight hesitation. ‘At a meeting,’ he says. The line of his jaw curves as sweetly as a seashell.

‘Ah.’ Not a wise course of enquiry. ‘Is Nancy’s mother here in Hong Kong?’ Oh dear, untactful too. ‘I’m sorry —’

‘No, she died at Nancy’s birth. She was French: of course you will have noticed Nancy has European blood.’ His face changes. ‘She died in agony because, as the wife of a Chinese man, there was no care for her. The British doctor refused to attend, saying she’d *made her bed*.’

After a moment he clears his throat. ‘Perhaps, one day, things will be different and China will have medical facilities, good ones, for everybody. We can only look towards the future.’

‘That may be a dangerous thing to look towards,’ I say quietly. ‘Some might think you were criticising the current arrangements.’

He smiles with his eyes, glancing at me. His mouth, the upper lip winged like a bird, is still. ‘Heaven forbid,’ he says.

So he’s a Red, I think, my heart thumping. And although I’ve long tried to avoid acknowledging it, so of course is Bao-lim. Still, I’ve been here long enough to know that a Communist in China is a very different creature from the spectre that haunts Western conservatives.

Here the Reds want people to have jobs and doctors and unbombed towns, to be safe from Chiang’s thugs and Japanese invaders. I may be politically naive, but that doesn’t actually seem a lot to ask of life.

Laurence Kuan is watching me and says, ‘Emotions flit across your face too, just like Nancy.’

‘I keep my emotions under complete control, I’ll have you know,’ I say lightly. ‘What sort of an actress would I be otherwise?’

‘I’ve seen your films. You’re a peerless actress.’

I almost gasp at the stab of grief. ‘I was peerless once. Now I teach in a Hong Kong slum.’

‘Now you teach a lonely, bullied child she has her own strengths. Still peerless.’

I return his poised, velvet-brown gaze for an instant — it’s all I can bear — then turn at the cries of admiration, smiling as if I haven’t a care in the world, to see what magnificent new dish is being brought to the table.

The streets are crowded with people lighting fireworks and screaming and laughing as they explode, and it takes the taxi some time to push through. When I get home Felix is slouched in his armchair with a brandy.

Padded by alcohol, the line of his jaw does not curve as sweetly as a seashell, although perhaps once it did. I put down my purse with a small sigh.

‘Good night, then?’ Felix says.

‘Lovely, you’d have enjoyed it. Mummy sends her regards.’ (She hadn’t.)

‘Sorry I missed it. Bit of a flap on, needed to get some cables away to London on the double.’

‘Really. Oh well, Happy New Year, anyway.’

He gives a contemptuous snort and finishes his drink. ‘New Year’s supposed to be the first of January, not whenever the locals feel like holding a party.’

I say nothing, and sit down to read a letter from Eliza I didn’t have time to open earlier. Somewhere outside there’s the screeching whoosh of a skyrocket followed by a cluster of explosions. For a moment I think, is that what it’s like in wartime? In Peking or Shanghai or Nanking?

Then I scold myself, don’t be so *gloomy*, darling, and open the letter. Eliza’s words are always a pleasure to read. They take me back to a civilised place that’s now a distant dream, where the streets are not scattered with human waste, where I don’t sweat like a pig, where my career is not a public humiliation.

A place where I’m a peerless actress.

I read quickly and say, ‘Oh, how lovely! Eliza and Harry are getting married!’

Felix grunts. ‘About time. He’s been screwing her for, what, a couple of years?’

‘I recall we were lovers for that long too before we made it legal.’

‘I wasn’t a married man then, though,’ he says pompously. ‘No, not quite the done thing.’

I think of Felix's friends, their unhappy wives and hard-faced mistresses.

'You *are* joking, aren't you?' I stop myself.

He grunts again and gets up, walks out and down the hall to the lavatory. He pees loudly with the door open, concluding with a familiar blurring sound that's thankfully drowned out by the crackle of a string of bangers exploding in the street.

I put my hands over my eyes and think, *honestly*, what with the hawking and spitting and shitting in the streets all around us, how can the odd fart make me want to kill my husband?

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