



PAUL LETTERS

# A CHANCE KILL

Your enemy's enemy  
is not your friend...



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*For Granny Sabina  
and all those who have been hounded by tyranny*

*And with eternal gratitude to Granda John  
and all those who fought for freedom*

‘Fear? What should a man fear?  
It’s all chance, chance rules our lives.’  
– Sophocles (*Oedipus the King*)

‘Destiny is no matter of chance. It is a matter of choice. It is not  
a thing to be waited for, it is a thing to be achieved.’  
– William Jennings Bryan

1939

ALIVE

# Chapter 1

*Thursday 31st August 1939*

Her mind alive with the words she had overheard last night, Dyta emerged onto the broad steps of the library and shielded her eyes from the lowering sun. She tied up her dark hair, pulled her white socks to her knees, and walked down the steps. Her father was so grey and sedate, it was hard to imagine a phrase less likely to emerge from his lips than *'your chance to kill'*.

A Baroque city where grand buildings rose above an all-encompassing street life, her father labelled Warsaw 'the Paris of the east'. Dyta pulled her father's new 35mm Leica from her satchel to test it out. It was both strange and natural that the cafés all along Krakowskie Przedmieście, crammed with soldiers in freshly pressed uniforms, were enjoying better business than usual. People ate, drank and laughed, clinging to normality, the distant buzz in the sky outdone by the hum of humanity on the ground.

Dyta looked up to follow the vapour trails of a trio of high-flying aircraft. Her eyes dropped onto a government billboard and then to a newsstand poster with the very same headline: 'STRONG, UNITED, READY.' It should have read: 'STRONG, UNITED, BLISSFULLY UNAWARE.'

She darted across the thoroughfare leading off to Kierbedź Bridge, where horse carts mingled with teeming trams and coughing motorcars. Across the cobbled square ahead, the white-washed royal palace hunkered down in the five o'clock sun. A handsome passer-by took Dyta's photograph for her. Handsome he may have been, but she had been duped by good looks before, just months ago – never again. She left him with a smile and squeezed inside a tram. It

trundled over the Vistula, towards her home suburb of Praga, but the glorious weather invited her to browse her fresh satchel-load of library books somewhere in the sunshine. The moment they glided off the bridge, she yanked the chained bell.

She walked along the forested riverbank. It was on this beach-fringed stretch of water that she had learned power lay in technique more than size. The slightest figure in the rowing club's August regatta, she had beaten the brawniest of girls to the single sculls' trophy. The trees thinned to reveal beachgoers dusting off the day's sand while others arrived and rolled up their work clothes. Ahead on the beachside path one crop-haired youth enveloped another in a head lock. He released his friend and stared at Dyta.

Her feet froze in fear.

Yesterday, her father had declared that she shouldn't leave home unchaperoned. What exactly she needed protection from he had not specified. She had wanted to scream at him, *'Stop treating me like a child! I'm seventeen years old!'*

Swaggering towards her, tall and rangy, was Janek, whom she had known at nursery school. His moves were shadowed by his latest accessory, Mirek. How had she been taken in by such a boy? That Mirek was handsome, attended church and had courted her patiently were lamentable grounds. Thoughts of where he had been on her body, and of what he'd proved himself capable of, still haunted her.

But Mirek was harmless without Janek's venom.

'What have we here? Don't I know you?' Janek stood within arm's reach and sneered down his nose. Her stomach fell away. Skulking behind Janek, Mirek averted his stare from hers. He had once complimented her bright blue eyes, and she had rewarded him amorously, fooled as she was.

Janek jabbed a finger at her. 'Fuck me! You're pig-lover's sister. We sure gave your shitty brother what he deserved.' His cackle turned the heads of nearby beachgoers. Her heart beat in trepidation. For Janek, befriending a Jew, as her brother had done, was even worse than being one.

Her eyes were wet and her throat dry. 'Hell's waiting for you

both!' she shrieked. Her brother in her heart, revenge in her eyes, she plunged her left foot forward first and, gaining momentum, thumped her right knee into Janek's balls. He yelped, clasped his hands to his crotch, bent double and fell sideways. Mirek stood in her way on the path. She lashed her right hand across his cheek. 'Burn slowly.'

As she ran away, Janek's yell trailed at her back: 'You're one dead pig-shagging bitch!'

Finally, the shaded path joined the heat-soaked pavement. She allowed her legs to slow, but her heart rate sped fearfully on.

It had been wretched luck to meet them, yet to have dealt blows to two of only three people in the world she hated felt wonderful. A girl could get away with such unladylike behaviour when unchaperoned; to meet Hitler alone one day would be glorious. But it was one thing to wish Hitler, Janek and Mirek were all dead. It would be quite another to be capable of killing anyone.

Two blocks from home, she silently ordered the adrenaline rushing to her head to abate, with all the effect of King Canute.

She hurried into their terraced street. Her family had a spacious three-storey home, but why they might have lived closer to town and school, as most civil service families did? When her father's work had taken them to live in Vienna and then Prague, school was always within a short walk, not three trams away.

Her head light, her blouse sweaty, she trudged up the outside steps. The triple-locked door told her no one was home. She slammed it shut and stood with her back against it, just as she had done the previous evening.

Yesterday, there were scraps of dry mud on the floor and voices spilling out of the front room study. 'We'll get the bastards, sir.' She had run on up the stairs to her bedroom as soon as she heard the snippets of Czech grow louder. Boots thumped across the hallway. By way of a farewell, one of the Czechs had said, 'If we're ever given the chance, we'll get rid of him.' The words her father had then said still reverberated around her head twenty-four hours later: 'Let's hope you'll soon get your chance to kill.' A chance to kill *whom?* After the front door had clonked shut last night, she'd watched the



taller of the two Czech soldiers turn and smile as though he had expected her to be there at her window.

Now she gasped in air. Each stair seemed to have doubled in height. Should Mother be told of the Janek/Mirek incident? Thinking about it, about the wider threat, about anything, was fraying her mind. At the top of the stairs the rising heat thickened.

Her bedroom door took an effort to open. The bed covers beckoned, but there was a note on the desk.

She took a step towards it...the heavy heat...her light head... desk moving...bright white...

Blackness.

# Chapter 2

*Saturday 2nd September 1939*

Tom could barely remember yesterday evening, but he could still taste it.

He shared a breakfast table in the Officers' Mess with the latest batch of pilots recruited for the RAF's belated expansion. A binding trait of these '39ers was that they were already sufficiently cocksure of themselves before they got cockeyed. At twenty-one, Tom was an old man in this company. He snapped on his peaked cap and left them to soak their hangovers in neo-Georgian splendour and a second helping of bacon and eggs.

The fresh air ambushed his heavy head. The early morn yet to disclose warmth, he crossed the public road fleeced within his jacket. Bits of the evening came back to him. Pilot Officer Ralph Hackett had imitated what he had assumed to be Hitler's goose-stepping reaction to yesterday's British ultimatum demanding the Germans pull back from Poland. And Muddy Richards had used a tea towel for a skirt to be a German tart who received much arse-pinching by Hackett's lecherous Adolf.

Tom showed his pass at the south-west gate and entered RAF Wyfen proper. He passed the Sergeants' Mess – miserable compared to the officers' country manor just outside the base – and cut across the parade square. Lower still down the pecking order were the Aircraftmen's barracks which cupped the square.

Striding towards Wing Commander Patterson's office, he found himself on the trail of a stranger who wandered into a porched entrance in apparent ignorance of 'Restricted Access'. The young man swaggered down the steps to the basement Operations Room. Tom

paused to take off his flying jacket, ensuring the rank on his service blazer was in full view. Dingy and devoid of personnel, a billiard-size maps table held the centre ground. Beyond the table, the intruder – unaware of Tom’s presence – stared up at the vast Operations Board on the far wall. Yet to be sullied with chalk, the gridded boxes gleamed black purity.

The young man’s shoulder board confirmed his lowly rank. ‘What’s your game, Aircraftman?’ Tom rested his palms on the vast tabletop, where his elbow nudged an open box of magnetic rakes and coloured markers. A soft-capped fringe of blond hair and a puckish face turned to face him. He was as tall as Tom yet couldn’t be more than eighteen years old. The lad hooked his hand to his forehead.

‘I’m James, Johnny James, and I—’

‘I don’t care much for your name or your half-arsed salute.’ RAF training instructors, panicked by war, were letting any young ‘Johnny’ through now. ‘What the buggery are *you* doing in our new Ops Room?’

‘Steady on, I’m just taking the initiative.’

‘To do what?’

Johnny James stepped up to the other side of the table. ‘Well, I was hoping for some clues about the first raid.’

Tom rolled his eyes. ‘We haven’t had one yet. We’re not even at war.’

‘We will be soon. I know Wyfen is training for Britain’s first move, and I want to be a part of the action. From what my father says, I’ve arrived just in time.’

‘I’d say you’re a couple or three years late.’ In his three years as a pilot, Tom had barrel-rolled and corkscrewed every kite the RAF could squeeze life out of. Then those aging aircraft were put out to pasture, literally, as training targets, at which point he had dive-bombed them beyond retirement. ‘James, what the bloody hell are you doing here?’

‘It’s my first day at Wyfen. I just finished training last week and thought I’d take a look around.’

‘I mean, why are you in the RAF? No *air gunner* has an accent

as plummy as yours.’ The RAF trade sewn into the lad’s chest brevet failed to match his sense of self-importance.

‘Well, originally Father did want me to go to Jesus and read Chaucer or such like, but *Boy’s Own’s* more my bag!’

‘So that’s why you joined up?’ Tom withdrew his palms from the table and straightened his back. ‘The RAF’s not bloody student hijinks. It’s about duty and loyalty.’

‘I joined up to fly,’ said James. ‘I intend to be a pilot, and a damn good one.’

Tom smirked. Just what 314 Squadron needed: a low-ranked erk who thinks he’s Biggles. ‘But now you’re a gunner, James. So what went wrong?’

‘Well, my Form Master would tell you it’s because I’m left-handed, an uncorrectable fault, apparently. But really it’s because of Father: Air Marshal James. You may have heard of him? Tells everybody outside the RAF he’s retired and everybody inside it what to do. So when I tried to join up on the first day after school ended, on the recruitment desk was my father’s fitter from the Great War, primed to slog me to the boundary. Father had informed him I wouldn’t officially be eighteen until September – this Tuesday, in fact. But I couldn’t wait that long to begin training, not when war was in the offing. So I promised to go to another recruitment office, one where they actually wanted to recruit people, and lie about my age, if needs merited it.’

‘You’ve certainly packed your bags full of bullshit, Aircraftman James.’

‘Steady on. You see, this fitter’s a simple chap. He’d been told on no account to let Air Marshal James’s son sign up as a pilot. So I said, with a straight bat, “Don’t sign me up as a pilot then. Make me a gunner.” He appeared to have lost his script for that.’

Tom caught himself shaking his head like a man thrice his age.

‘I offloaded my luggage, popped in to see Dougie Patterson, and then came back here.’

‘*Dougie?*’

‘Dougie P told me to report to a “Flying Officer Hubbard”.’

‘Well then, report you must. Get a chivvy on, James, and track down F/O Hubbard.’

‘Righto.’

The new recruit rounded the maps table. But before he could stride on by, Tom caught his forearm.

‘A word of advice, James. Although Flying Officer Hubbard is not one for formality, you’d do well to address your superiors as sir.’

‘Will do, *sir*.’ James mimicked his earlier salute and turned to go.

Tom followed him up the darkened staircase. It would be nonsense to throw a schoolboy gunner into the mix at the last minute, however well connected he might be. But it wouldn’t be Tom who picked his crew for what would be Britain’s most prestigious military operation in a generation. He watched James saunter out into the day’s first offering of sunlight and wondered how long it would take the boy to find him – Flying Officer Thomas Hubbard – again.

# Chapter 3

*Sunday 3rd September 1939*

Homely traces of leather and cedar filled Dyta's nostrils. She opened her eyes onto her bookshelf and widened them at its new guests: Dostoevsky, Voltaire and Henry Gray's *Anatomy: Descriptive and Surgical*. At the start of the summer, she had sought light relief in *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*. She smuggled it back to the library the next day – it was less comprehensible than Gray's *Anatomy*.

Sunlight warmed her lemon curtains. Behind them, a thunderclap rattled the window in its frame, shaking anxiety through her once again. She plucked a note-cum-bookmark out of her childhood hardback of Polish folk tales. '*Dyta, I'm out looking for you. Stay home and wait for me, your father says things are about to happen. Love Mum.*' The world was a simpler place when that was written, just two days ago, before the first bombs fell.

Her nation needed help, but her parents saw her as a child to be sent away to safety, wherever that may be. They had friends in Vienna and Prague, but both were now a part of the Reich. The Reich's shadow had fallen over her family home months ago, and closed-door meetings in her father's study had become common. She was told to remain upstairs behind her closed bedroom door, where she could smell the tobacco permeating from the room below but could not hear the words.

The lump behind her ear had receded, but the bruises on her right hip and shoulder were in full bloom. It was only the second time she had ever fainted, yet Dr Stroika had declared it a 'condition' known as 'teenage hypotension'. Here was an opportunity to play up the pain in order to avoid the evacuation her parents intended.

Staying in bed, however, gained nothing but time. And so she read.

*The Fool Who Searched for Fear* had been a favourite childhood tale. An apparent simpleton who had no knowledge of fear, the fool journeyed to hostile lands in search of it. He failed to find it, although he did find advantage in the fear of others, as did thugs like Janek. But perhaps fear was not fear if your enemy didn't see it. Had Jerzy shown fear when Janek and Mirek attacked him? Or had he really behaved as the fearless older brother he liked to think he was?

She had just sighed her mind away when it was jarred by the doorbell downstairs. Instinctively summoned, she arose from her bed, eased open her door and edged to the balustrade overlooking the hall.

'How are you, my friend?' Her father's visitor spoke Polish with an unfamiliar accent.

Her father dispensed with the niceties. 'Have you brought what we're hoping for?'

She saw the dark-suited gentleman remove his hat to concede he was a head shorter than her father. He led his host across the hallway. After the study door had snapped shut behind them, she sloped barefoot down the stairs and scouted around. The soft wool of the sitting room rug piled up between her toes as she stood and listened out for her mother in the adjoining kitchen. But only her father was home. She returned to the hallway and cupped her ear to the polished door of the study. Ice clinked as though the glass were in her own hand.

'*Na zdrowie*, Colonel Zając.' Her father had been in the army before she was born, but he had never been promoted above Sergeant or Captain; she couldn't remember which.

'And *your* health,' her father replied.

'War changes a lot of things, but not you, Colonel,' said the visitor. She frowned at the door. He aged daily; thin and balding, now barely branded by the family's trademark mahogany hair.

'Major Gubbins, call me Jakub. I'm long a civilian.'

'Aye, civilian is one word for it.' The visitor's Polish was fluent,

although he began some sentences by adding alien words. ‘Your daughter’s a pretty young lady.’ She flinched. This ‘Major Gubbins’ must be stood just a metre or two the other side of the door, staring at her framed photograph on the wall.

‘We don’t have much time, Major.’ Her father’s voice now sounded a step removed. ‘What is Britain doing to help us?’ It was now a strain to hear. The polished grain of the door slid coolly under her cheek as she placed her ear over the cardboard-thin gap between the door frame. Why didn’t Gubbins answer the question? Surely, Britain and France’s armies would arrive soon? Hitler would be deposed, forced into exile like Napoleon.

‘What will you need when Poland is overrun?’ said Gubbins. Her heart raced, and her mind scattered in all directions.

‘For fuck’s sake!’ Dyta shuddered in shock. That was the first time she had ever heard her father swear. ‘We’re only two days into war, and we won’t *be* overrun if your lot get properly involved.’

‘Look, Jakub, you’re bugged. The Germans outnumber you and outgun you. The best you can hope for after overground defeat is underground victories.’

‘We have already slowed the German advance, they’re barely inside our borders,’ said her father. ‘Our army is far bigger than yours. We just need your air force.’

‘Och, the RAF doesn’t have long range aircraft that could sustain a battle over here. What you may reasonably expect, at least, is Britain to stage one showpiece raid, something to suggest we can hit the Nazis where it hurts. An operation to boost Polish morale and perhaps buy you a little time to...’ The voices faded to the far side of the room, towards the hearth, bare since spring. Her father would seat his guest in the armchair by the bookcase and himself in his rotatable chair, his desk within reach behind him. The curtains, ever-closed nowadays, would screen out any view from eyes on the street.

The murmurs she heard were no longer words, so she crept upstairs. She threw herself onto the bed without bothering to close her bedroom door. Gradually, the tensity began to pass out of her body.



But then the study door opened and voices carried up the stairs. 'So why did those Czechs come to see you?' said Gubbins. Dyta sat up. Those Czechs of the thumping muddy boots on Thursday.

'Well, I'd met one of them once in Prague. Knew his uncle well. This pair were stationed in the Sudetenland, before Chamberlain gave it to Germany and they were demobbed. What they want now is a chance to kill.' The words riddled through her once again. What was this world her father lived in? His supposedly dreary civil service career was clearly not so. 'And they have some definite ideas about how to go about it.'

'Aye, it's all about *how* and *who*,' said Gubbins.

'I've told you, and those Czechs, which Nazi I'd like to start with. Hitler can wait.'

'Yes, but what does it matter now which Nazi started this war?' said Gubbins.

'It will matter one day. You may think Poland is doomed, but one day we shall achieve retribution.'

'This SS list, how close to the top of it do you think you are?' said Gubbins.

'Close enough,' said her father. 'I know too much to let them take me alive.' No! She half stifled a gasp.

'You may also wish to think, old friend, about what to do to ensure the safety of your family,' said Gubbins.

'I never stop thinking about that.' The tears in her eyes burst free.

# Chapter 4

*Monday 4th September 1939*

A 'V' of five bombers skimmed over the crests of North Sea waves, on course to be history makers...or shamefully lost. Loose off the lead Blenheim's port wing, Tom held the bow-tie handles of the control column steady and wondered which it would be.

This afternoon was his, and Britain's, first offensive of the war. A sea of grey lay beneath their feet, a ceiling of mist sagged low above, and rainwater blurred the Perspex arched over them. Where to look when you could see little to have faith in and you couldn't trust your instruments? Even the altimeter jiggled mockingly below nought feet. Flying into the sea was as likely as finding the target.

To the right of the instrument panel, workmanlike in blue overalls, Sergeant Bill Jones crouched over his compass and gazed through the transparent nose cone. Today their guide was the flitting shadow of Flight Lieutenant Doran's Blenheim at the point of the 'V', sixty feet ahead: out of bounds to wireless communication – for fear of enemy eavesdropping – but close enough to crash into.

At this sea-spraying altitude, salty air stirred the high-octane stench through a sweaty cockpit. Tom's leather helmet encircled a clammy face freed of the dangling oxygen mask. He propped his goggles on his forehead, loosened his life vest and unzipped his sheepskin jacket. He had shoved his fur-lined gauntlets under his arse to cushion against the metal bucket seat, releasing his fingers to work the Blenheim's cumbersome controls with the necessary dexterity.

Reluctant to stray far into foreign waters, the fog buffering eastern England faded. The weeks spent practising manoeuvres off East Anglia were in preparation for this possible first strike. After

40 minutes of nothing at 200 miles per hour, Tom could now see miles rather than yards. This seemed of advantage until he spotted a high-flying biplane – surely German – edging across their path. Bill's last words before take-off were, 'Let's hope the Admiral doesn't know we're coming.' But now, perhaps the Admiral did.

Bill unfurled another map. He reviewed the course their leader had set over a gloomy sea where dead reckoning lost the bearings it depended upon – landmarks.

The third and final seat in the Blenheim was a matter of some controversy. Their stalwart rear gunner, thirty-one-year-old Lewis 'Old Man' Robson, had apparently picked now to develop a case of tennis elbow. Tom had pleaded with Patterson to give them a seasoned replacement. Yet, incredulously, swinging the twin machine guns around in the hydraulically-powered turret was the new boy – not eighteen until tomorrow – Johnny James. His role was to protect their rear by scanning the leaden sky for preying kites. In the cockpit, they would never hear a word from him until they landed. The only internal communication 'system' to prevail over the roar from the twin engines was, theoretically, to send a handwritten message to the gun turret with a yank on a pulley rope.

Two hours into their flight, Bill's questioning grimace dissolved. He handed Tom a note with the result of his calculated scribbles: '*Estd 10 nm to Lfall*'. Bill even wrote English in Welsh: easy on the vowels, heavy on the consonants.

Tom had never before been asked to find a bona fide target by placing blind faith in calculated vision. Would they know Danish land from German if they saw it? Indeed, was that distant grey line ahead coastal ground or sea mist?

Flight Lieutenant Doran signalled with a wiggle of his wingtips, and Bill gesticulated *landfall ahead*. Tom followed Doran through a climbing turn, and they levelled off at 500 feet. Beyond a scattering of desolate islets ahead, the mainland would host German anti-aircraft batteries and, equally dangerous, German binoculars. Any squawking watchman could have the Luftwaffe launched at them within minutes.

Tom may have lacked the class credentials, but he had been brought up to embody the virtues of gentlemanly conduct which Chamberlain personified. They must give the Nazis a hiding but go about it the right way, the British way. The Prime Minister was right. There must be rules to this new kind of warfare-by-air, and who better to establish them? Hence the government directive which affirmed that on no account was the RAF to risk hitting civilians – their bombs must not fall on land. Even naval vessels were out of bounds when wharfed.

While Bill cross-referenced topography with cartography, Tom stared through muslin haze at mudflat islands. A glance at an aerial photograph they had dissected in the Briefing Room earlier suggested that, remarkably, they had touched the enemy coast just a couple of miles south of track. Soon, they would go into their attack run. Eleven seconds of mayhem was all that would matter from a six-hour trip, and then only if they found their target and avoided flak. The possibility of death lurked uneasily. Tom's parents may never see him again. Recently, they had been getting on worse than ever, but they would surely be brought together by the death of their only child.

Prompted by Doran ahead, Tom's left hand eased back the throttles and his right pushed forward the control stick. They dropped to 200 feet. The sea was calm, the rain had exhausted, and the low cloud above remained their shield from Luftwaffe vultures. Below, the curtain mist parted before them, and from the back of the stage, grey and uncertain, a jagged pyramid loomed forward. Bill checked photographs against the emerging stern view: his thumbs-up confirmed the target. Back-dropped by the wharf cranes of Wilhelmshaven naval base a mile behind, and anchored precisely where morning reconnaissance had reported, the fortified decks of the *Admiral Scheer* battleship projected 150 feet into the air.

The two Blenheims behind them broke off to attack the second target, the *Emden*, a light cruiser anchored further out to sea. At that morning's briefing Tom had chuckled with Flying Officer Harry Emden, who led the pair of breakaway Blenheims, over how the

history books would revel in the extraordinary coincidence of F/O Emden destroying *the Emden*.

Bill set the time-lapse camera to record their own show and lay on his beer belly to peer down through his bombsight. His fingers gripped around the bomb jettison remote control, his thumb hovered over the release button. 'Release early, Bill,' Tom whispered to himself. He visualised the two bombs dropping inside the bay, the bungee cords stretching, the doors opening, releasing and snapping shut. Accuracy depended upon the strength of the cords and knowing your aircraft's habits.

Muddy Richards eased the third aircraft of their 'V' wide, left of Doran, and Tom did likewise on the starboard side. After Doran would make a dissecting run from central stern to the point of the bow, Tom would cross the battleship diagonally, just seconds before Muddy Richards from the other side. Muddy had the perilous job of attacking last. He would count those eleven seconds with his life depending upon it. Eleven seconds from the drop of Doran's 500lb bombs to their delayed explosion a dangerously close fifty yards below.

James should be primed to kick in his rear-facing machine guns after they passed the battleship.

This was it. From starboard astern, Tom swept towards the *Admiral Scheer*. Ahead to his left, Doran drove home from dead astern and peppered the decks with his wing-mounted Browning. Seamen – several initially obscured by washing hanging on a line – scattered to their stations.

Doran's two bombs bounced off the rear deck. 'Bollocks!' Tom shouted to himself. That wasn't pre-considered by the polished brass who conducted briefing.

Tom opened his Browning machine gun. Before the ship's stern slid beneath their wings, Bill's thumb twitched. As the top of the *Admiral Scheer*'s tower mast came careering towards them, there was a thud and clunk. The aircraft leapt over the tower, free from burden and eager to climb. Explosions bellowed up, and tracer fire streaked ever closer to their wing tips. Tom's heart thumped with

terror. Being shot at for the first time in his life pumped adrenaline through him. He jinked this way then that to shift his bumbling aircraft out of the firing line. He banked her hard to port and pulled the 9-boost for maximum thrust. 'C'mon, girl! And c'mon, James! Give it a squirt!'

Now at a promising angle to the battleship below, James let the machine gun fly. After it ceased, Tom felt his aircraft tremble at the incoming fire. His rapid heart rate contrasted with the passing of slow seconds. Then the gunfire became a step removed, now targeted at the Blenheim behind them. He glanced back through the Perspex over his left shoulder: 'C'mon, Muddy!'

Under a barrage of fireworks, Muddy Richards emerged safely from the smoke billowing up from the ship. Muddy had swooped in on the ship as the seconds ticked to expiration, but, fearing explosions under his belly, he had pulled out of his attacking run and lobbed his bombs short into the sea.

From 500 feet high, Tom looked across in horror at the *Emden*. 'Shit!' There was nothing to be done. The first dive-bombing Blenheim had caught flak and flamed steadily downwards. Flying Officer Emden smacked his aircraft into the superstructure of the ship. Tom was still staring when moments later the second Blenheim, streaming black smoke, crashed into the sea. Six lives were extinguished before his eyes; he had known two of those boys since flying training school.

Tom was in shock; for several seconds his aircraft piloted itself.

He was buffeted out of his stupor by the first of a regular beat of explosions. The *Admiral Scheer's* pom-pom guns fired dandelion bursts into the dusky sky above. The thunder of each shell quivered through the aircraft and crew. No training could have prepared them for this.

The clouds closed, the air churned and the aircraft bumped, adding its own thoughtful bobbing to Tom's weaving to outsmart the gun crews below.

Rain recommenced with patriotic gusto, for although it obscured his sight of his leader in the half-light, their homeward

bound aircraft was shrouded from enemy view. But an aircraft whose best asset was cloud cover was not an aircraft to take the fight to the enemy.

Once safely embraced within Britain's coastal fog, Tom wondered at this war. Shaken by the day's events, he wondered at tomorrow. Could the Luftwaffe be trusted to follow British rules, to avoid flying over towns, to attack only military targets out at sea? His father had instilled in him a Chamberlain-like sense of fair play, but would it prove *sense* at all?

The RAF consisted predominately of Bristol Blenheims, but why had they built warplanes so unfit for war? Maybe he should seek a higher calling, or at least a faster one, in one of the new fighters, perhaps?

Before their nightfall landing back in Cambridgeshire, he had dismissed such faithless thoughts. He clambered out of the cockpit and recalled his father's maxim: *Loyalty is the tiller of a man.*

# Chapter 5

*Monday 4th September 1939*

*The priest sleighed through the black of night.*

Dyta thought of her brother, wedged a finger in her novel and stared out from her bed. Reading about characters striving through war added unwanted texture to the stuttering soundtrack outside.

Jerzy had not behaved like a potential priest, as more than a few Warsaw girls could testify. He had applied for a place at university despite his limited reading: nothing beyond his Scouting magazines, Polish histories and, recently and opportunistically, the Bible. Their parents were no doubt pleased to gain a return on years of coaxing their two children to church. Until his ‘epiphany’, Jerzy had required dogged cajoling. She had heard through schoolyard rumours that her brother had chosen Krakow University because the girls there were said to be both prettier and easier. And he chose Theology because admittance required minimal effort: biblical knowledge – and impressing that knowledge upon his well-connected local advocate, Father Wójcik – appeared to be the singular entrance requirement.

Dyta sat up in bed. Backlit by evening sunshine, her curtains glowed apricot-orange. Father had insisted they remained closed, as if they would offer protection from an errant bomb.

Had Jerzy been a feckless do-nothing? His charm had certainly allowed his vices free passage. In their mother’s eyes, Jerzy had always been the cheerful ‘do-gooder’. But the years when Jerzy could meaningfully help his little sister with her homework were long gone. His life had been so easy – well, until April that year. He had spent Easter Sunday grouchy hung-over, yet that evening was the



first time he had ever taken himself off to Mass unbidden and alone. At home, Dyta had curled up in an armchair with a Russian novel, while across the Turkmen rug her mother sagged into the settee with a magazine. Dyta had read through war, famine and unrequited love by the time the front door shuddered open that Easter evening. She had just risen to her feet when the sitting room door crashed inwards, and in staggered a bloodied figure. Barely recognisable, Jerzy stumbled forward, fillets of flesh gouged from his inside-out cheek. She stood grounded as he collapsed onto the floorboards. His head thumped onto the straw-coloured corner of the rug and rested on the wool, facing her. Blood congealed on the trim of the rug and puddled onto the floorboards. And Dyta fainted for the first time in her life.

Some would see it as Jerzy's mistake – to accompany a boy known to be of Jewish descent back from church. That Rubin's father was a Catholic Pole meant nothing to anti-Semitic nationalists. The attack occurred on Praga's main thoroughfare, just off Kierbedź Bridge. Janek and Jerzy had played together as small children, before the family's stay abroad. A decade later, Janek branded Jews 'pig-shaggers' and sought to 'beat the kosher out' of them and their friends. In drawing aggression onto himself, Jerzy had enabled Rubin to slip away unscathed. Mirek – who had spent that very afternoon with his arms around Dyta – helped pin Jerzy to the ground to allow Janek to unleash his rage in a knife-wielding frenzy. Many witnessed the attack, but none came forward. Some feared reprisals, whereas others felt sympathy...for the attackers.

Dyta's mind was startled away from the attack and into the present by the thump of feet up the stairs. Perhaps her father would bring her some good news; news of the Germans retreating now Britain and France had declared war?

There was a knock at her door, and familiar long limbs idled in. 'Hey, Sis! You alright?'

'Your hair!' she said. Gone was Jerzy's tangled mop, now shaved close to the bone. He sat on her bed beside her, envelope in hand. He looked as thin as ever, but somehow older.

'I haven't seen you all week. Where have you been?' she said.

‘Getting these developed for you!’ he lied.

The six-centimetre scar down his cheek failed to debase his clean-faced grin. Jerzy’s confidence undiminished, the scar had added a certain mystique and dividends of extra attention. Their father had arranged the latest in plastic surgery to remodel the left side of his face, and, six months on, only tracery remained on his jawline. Jerzy’s attack should be avenged, yet *he* didn’t think so. Not so much out of religious generosity of spirit, more because he couldn’t be bothered.

‘Mum said you were out clearing up bomb damage and building barricades. What’ve you really been doing?’

‘Is it too hard to believe I’ve been doing some hard work?’ His tensed facial features showed his irritation. ‘Mum wasn’t lying to you. Those things needed doing outside the city, so I took my sleeping bag and bedded down by our work site.’

She conceded a smile and edged the photographs out of the envelope: splendorous Warsaw, blue-skyed and sunned. The final photograph featured Dyta herself, set against the gleaming white Royal Castle. ‘Where’s Mum today?’

‘I think she’s—’

‘She’s in town, collecting some documents.’ Their father had appeared in the doorway.

‘I hope she’s safe,’ said Dyta.

Her father stepped towards the bed. ‘They’ve bombed airfields, not the city centre. More of their planes may get through, but don’t worry, a residential neighbourhood like Praga won’t be their target.’ He sounded proud, as though he had intentionally located his family safely out of the way.

‘Have they attacked Germany yet?’ she asked.

‘Yes, the British attacked a German naval base yesterday. And that should be just the start.’

Dyta smiled. Then she realised that for the first time in her life, she was no longer sure whether to believe her father. ‘We didn’t really attack Germany first, did we, Dad?’ The Nazis said that Poles had fired first at a German border town.

‘No, Dyta.’ There was a pause, as though he was thinking carefully about what to divulge. ‘At Gleiwitz, SS Obergruppenführer Reinhard Heydrich dressed up his soldiers in Polish uniforms, and they *pretended* to attack a German radio station. They even photographed some dead bodies in German uniforms, some poor *untermenschen*, no doubt.’ Janek, Mirek, Hitler and now one more. Reinhard Heydrich was the fourth person in the world she hoped to meet alone one day.

‘And minutes later the German Army stormed the length of our border,’ Jerzy added. Clearly he already knew all their father had said. While she had feigned illness, the male members of her family had been among those loyally working for their country. She dropped her head forward and at once looked up at her father again. ‘But they said they only wanted Danzig back!’

‘Dyta, you’re always so trusting, and I love you all the more for it. You must always search for “truth”, but you must never depend upon it, not in this world. Everyone is dishonest – the only variation is by degree and motive.’

‘Including you, Dad?’

‘If I could show you the reality of my work, you would see that deceit and self-preservation go hand in glove.’

Jerzy stood up from the bed, allowing their father to sit close to his daughter. From a breath away, she delved into his unfathomable eyes. She had inherited their blue-ice intensity, yet her eyes were a child’s first book, whereas his were impossible to read.

‘Your injuries appear light,’ said her father, ‘compared to the last time you fainted.’ A worried smile crossed her face, and she stiffened back against the pillowed headboard. Her father took hold of her hand. ‘It’s not safe for you and your mother here.’

‘Then how will it be safe for you and Jerzy?’

‘I must support my colleagues to stop the Nazis. And Jerzy... well, there’s nothing more I could’ve done.’

‘What do you mean?’ said Dyta.

Jerzy shifted his weight from one leg to another and flattened his grin.

‘I tried to slow him down,’ said their father.

‘I told you I’ve been busy. Building up the city’s defences, on top of intensive training,’ said Jerzy.

She sprang forward from her pillows. He was supposed to be a student, not a soldier. ‘You’re in the army? *Already?*’

She stared, Jerzy nodded. ‘You’d do the same, Dyta,’ he said. But what could a mere girl do in war? ‘I leave for the front tomorrow morning. I’d better go pack.’ Jerzy turned and left the room.

Her father patted her hand. ‘He’ll be back and so will you; it’s just a precaution for women and children.’ She had no doubt which he thought she was. Too young to influence her future, she was old enough to mistrust it. ‘Anyway, Dyta, the south won’t be the battleground. Can you imagine them taking on Auntie Grażyna?’

She sucked air in through her teeth. ‘Great-Aunt Grażyna is absolutely—’

‘Dying to see you,’ interrupted her father.

Her face squirmed, looking for a way out. ‘What if the Germans take over *all* of Poland, including Great-Aunt Grażyna’s?’

‘We have worked out a plan for you – for us. You must do this for me. I know what needs to be done.’

# Chapter 6

*Tuesday 5th September 1939*

To civilians, ale-yard banter and whisky chasers probably seemed an odd way to honour the dead, but the previous day's losses had strengthened each man's desire to drink life to the full. Tom still felt shot to ribbons when he woke, but then the baton change from drunk to hung-over soon restored reality all too vividly. A seasick nausea threatened to rise from his stomach.

Tom skipped breakfast, dashed in to see Patterson and then dragged his navigator into the Operations Room. 'What the bloody hell's that doing on our new Ops Board?' said Bill. 'Who put it up?' The *Daily Mail* cutting was taped to the wall *next* to the Operations Board, but Bill's valleys intonation could add a millstone to any injustice.

'Our new gunner.' Tom scratched at a corner of the tape and pulled down the article.

'Shagging Nora! This lad's got the bloody nerve of a gas lamp down a mine.' Bill's blinkered audience across the table was two Waafs from Clerical unpacking boxes and unfurling maps. 'He could have pinned up worse, mind. Does it mention his name?'

'No,' said Tom.

'Although he probably thinks he's the bullock's bollocks just for being there!' One of the Waafs offered Bill a scouring glance. RAF Wyfen had been allocated its first girls from the Women's Auxiliary Air Force just last month, but Tom didn't recognise this frosty pair, so they must be greener still. 'Skip, you always say "*loyalty is the tiller of a man*" – could you say he's showing loyalty from the off?'

'No, I'd say he puffs a steam train of hot air before he can even stoke a boiler.' But Tom was prepared to ditch his Blenheim, his

crew and his squadron...so was *he* the best judge of loyalty?

Bill lent over for a closer look. “*Undaunted by the washing, we proceeded to bomb the battleship*” – I’m sure I gave Doran that bloody line! Hold on, Skip...why does it say “*an RAF navigator/bomb aimer*”? I’ve got a bloody name, haven’t I?

‘I’d rather they’d left my name out of it,’ said Tom.

‘Says how we made direct hits amidships. Could be a gong in it for you.’

Tom shook his head. Direct *bouncers* – which meant armour unpierced and ship unsunk. Patterson could keep the Distinguished Flying Cross, but perhaps he could arrange a transfer to an aircraft built for fighting? ‘A DFC should be given to Emden’s boys for catching a packet,’ said Tom.

‘It should, but it won’t,’ said Bill as he lifted his eyes away from the cutting in Tom’s hand.

‘I popped in to see Patterson,’ said Tom. ‘They’re going ahead and dispersing seasoned pros to new stations across the country.’

‘Where to for us then, Skip?’

‘That’s the good news – you, me and Muddy get to stay at Wyfen and head up Patterson’s new *3-1-4* Squadron. Hence why so many ’39ers have come to us. They’re making Muddy Squadron Leader.’

‘Good for Muddy and us, I suppose,’ said Bill.

‘Patterson lost his wool when I asked him why he’s given us James. He said it wasn’t for me to reason why. But he did mention he knew James’s old man back in the Royal Flying Corps. Seems Johnny James was destined for us even before Robson’s “tennis elbow”.’

Tom folded the newspaper cutting into his pocket and looked up at the Ops Board. He avoided eye contact with the names chalked up under ‘Failed To Return’ but ran down the day’s ‘Battle Order’ list, as though he hadn’t already done so twice. ‘Nothing for us. Come on, let’s have a brew.’

The day – and today’s hangover – dragged on inside Wyfen’s hodge-podge of redbrick offices and rusting hangars. During the morning, Tom suffered congratulatory debriefings from senior officers and

polite interrogation from the ground crew. His afternoon gave way to rummy, whist and a new crew-room rumour that they may all soon be stationed abroad. It was only Day Three for Britain, but, Tom had expected war *then* peace, not both together.

His evening was once again mapped out with India pale ale in the Officers' Mess. Tom now knew that neither he nor his aircraft could keep his crew safe indefinitely, and he feared another state of alcoholic undress may make him admit as much.

The door to the anteroom sprang shut behind him, blacking out the light and sealing in the smoke. He drifted by Perkins' piano rendition of 'Are You Having Any Fun?' and stepped around a domino table. He received handshakes and many a 'good show', but there was no mention of F/O Emden and the other casualties. He ordered a pint and swept it clear off the waiter's tray before some cock-brained nineteen-year-old could hope to sink a whisky bomb into it.

He sidled up to twenty-eight-year-old Squadron Leader Muddy Richards, offered congratulations and joined him in spectating at the main group of half a dozen chaps. Under the gaze of the King, these pilots stood smart in washed-out blue – uniform down to the cigarette in one hand and pint of bitter in the other. Ralph Hackett, a week out of training school, knew it all; worse, Muddy guffawed *with* him, not *at* him. Tom received a celebratory toast and gave one to friends lost. Precisely what they were celebrating, that is, whether there was *any* damage done at Wilhelmshaven, remained unspecified, conveniently obscured by the fog of war. But the repartee resumed and the pints diminished along with Ralph's credibility.

Tom retreated to rest an elbow on the piano. He spluttered his pint at the sight of Johnny James straying in. How did an Aircraftman get past the orderly outside the Officers' Mess door? Johnny removed his forage cap and 'halloed' Tom as he sauntered by. Across the room, Ralph beckoned Johnny, not that he needed encouragement.

Tom edged nearer to the main group, where Ralph flung an arm around Johnny. 'This chap's one of us, masquerading as a gunner.

He's the son of Air Marshal James, a good friend of my father's. And, what's more, today is his twenty-first birthday!' So Johnny had given himself three extra years? Tom struggled to believe what he was seeing. Muddy orchestrated a chorus of 'For He's a Jolly Good Fellow', and before it had finished Johnny had a pint in one hand, a shot in the other and a cigar in his mouth. He dispatched one drink then the other and was adorned with Ralph's flying jacket and officer's cap. Tom listened in as the '39ers titillated 'Honorary Pilot Officer James' with talk of a local top-heavy girl with unblemished body and blessed charm – to the point where Johnny insisted upon meeting her later.

Tom escaped before the drinking became competitive, foreseeing unappealing results: Ralph's singing, Muddy's dancing and, potentially far worse, Tom's honesty.

The World's End, and a quiet pint with a friend, was ten minutes' walk away, which gave Tom too much clear air in which to think. He turned down the hedged lane and glanced back at the officers' barracks. His bedroom light was on. Edwards, his batman, would be hanging Tom's clothes, neatly pressed. Was the day near when Edwards would strip the room of belongings, ready for the next chap? Yesterday, five of the fifteen Blenheims that were sent to bomb Wilhelmshaven naval base returned home having failed to find it, whereas five others eventually found it but 'Failed To Return'. Only one crewman was seen to bail out – perilously low. At least fifteen lives, gone; *that* was not in the *Daily-Bloody-Mail*.

Abutting a crossroads, The End bit the corner off a wheat field. Cottage-sized, with tables coarse-grained, floorboards begrimed and ceiling yellowed, this was an old man's watering hole in all besides current clientele. Recently, the takings had swelled along with the number of RAF personnel posted to Wyfen. The End offered neither food nor music, but Tom liked it because the landlord appreciated that ale should be served in thick glass mugs, not thin, handleless beer-warming glasses.

Five youthful Warrant Officers shuffled around two knowing



Waafs at the bar. Tom smiled his way past. Three local farmhands still held a corner, but there were no old men, although Sergeant Bill Jones did a fair impersonation of one, sat by the empty fireplace in a wing-backed armchair, puffing away on his pipe.

Tom bought two pints, and Bill patted the neighbouring empty chair and then his own paunch. 'Come on, less of your officer's stance. My belly gets a march on you by drinking sitting down.'

He had developed an even friendship with Bill, where perhaps his own rank and role balanced the Welshman's extra seven years. Seated, they looked like brothers: sure jawlines, heavy eyelids and dark hair brilliantined back and tapered above the collar. When they stood, Tom straightened into an ironed out version of Bill.

They talked around but not about the men lost. 'You think our kites are good enough to win?' Tom said.

'I'd take a Blenheim over the Great War biplanes some of our blokes are flying into this war.' Bill slugged his beer. 'She's bloody fast.'

'She *was*, when I was at school.' It was a 1934 competition, launched through the *Daily Mail*, which had challenged British engineers to build the fastest aircraft in the world. This spur in the side of government complacency caught the public imagination, emboldened the Bristol Aeroplane Company and motivated sixteen-year-old Master Hubbard to study his way to flying training school. 'I still have the *Flight* magazine cutting from when Vickers-Armstrong tested their new fighter against our bomber.' Tom plucked it from his wallet. "*The Spitfire roared past the Royal Standard at well over 300mph, followed by the Blenheim, the speed of which was a revelation of what a modern bomber can do. We certainly have a bomber that can out-fly any fighter in service in the world today.*" He sneered at the fantasy. 'Not now, we don't. Not now she's got a chuffing trainload of baggage weighing her down.' Not least 1000lbs of bombs and a stove-sized wireless transmitter. What's more, during pre-war manoeuvres over English countryside, they didn't have the swift and sharp-toothed ME109's on the trail of their heavily

pregnant fox. It took bravery to fly in a machine you knew could have the beating of your airborne enemies; it took something else to fly an aircraft you knew could not.

‘Do you remember the fanfare laid on for our first Blenheim?’ said Bill. Tom had been inches from Bill’s side, among the throng of fitters, friends and family.

‘All for Muddy Richards,’ said Tom. ‘Not that we called him that until later that day, mind!’ Upon landing, Flight Lieutenant Arthur Richards had waved from his open cockpit and then applied the newly developed – and treacherously powerful – wheel brakes. The tail rose, the nose dipped, both propellers thrust into the earth and the Blenheim flipped over onto its back. The pilot was thrown face down into the mud, and his Christian name would remain buried by his men for evermore.

‘So, admit it. You hanker after a bloody Hurricane like a frustrated schoolboy,’ said Bill.

‘It’s not that I want a fighter,’ Tom lied, ‘it’s more that as they’ve built more Blenheims than any other aircraft’ – unarmoured and poorly armed as they were, he was close to adding – ‘they should bloody well let us use them. While the Luftwaffe runs amok in Poland, the Air Ministry’s restrictions undermine their own arse-wipe strategy. They believe offensive ops are the key to victory yet let the bastard enemy jump the start in terms of aircraft, air defences and in their wilful ignorance of Queensbury rules!’

‘Enough of your bloody revolutionary talk,’ said Bill.

Tom leaned forward from the wing-backed armchair to ensure he was heard. ‘If they won’t give our bombers a chance to do some pissing damage, then give me a machine that can. Fighter pilots won’t get told “you can only fire if your target is out at sea”.’

‘Shagging Nora! Enough!’

Tom eased back into his chair and broke into a smile. ‘I’m always thrown sideways when you say that. It puts quite a picture in my mind. I’ve got a reptilian great-aunt named Nora.’

Bill laughed and gulped down his pint. ‘It’s funny that Patterson wouldn’t tell you why Robson was about to be replaced

anyway. And what do you make of this Johnny James? I was hoping for the usual tradesman type. We're due a plumber, I'd say. The wife's wanting a new loo put in, *inside* the house this time, so I could do with a discount sewage specialist.'

'I'm not sure there's much "typical" about our new Johnny. He's a public school rugby captain – plumm-y rather than plumb-er. He's overly keen and batty as a barmpot. But I am glad he's on *our* side.'

'Public school? What the bloody hell's he doing as an air gunner?'

'His OM.'

'They've got a lot to answer for. Didn't yours send you in the other direction?' It was true, Tom nodded, he would more likely be a gunner than a pilot if it was not for the education that came with his old man's job.

Bill upped and returned with beers. 'Cheers, Bill. After this one I'm going to check on Yvon.' To visit her at the end of an evening's drinking was fast becoming a habit. 'Tell me, how's Ivy and the kids?'

'Oh, you know, or maybe you don't. Ivy tells me Daisy's projecting niceties from both ends and then, before you know it, Dai runs straight through it and decorates the carpets and walls for us! It's more like a war zone than most bloody days round here!' Tom had sat Dai on his lap in the cockpit of a grounded Blenheim during the 'bring-the-family' open day in June, now an era away.

Bill asked after his parents. 'Same as ever,' said Tom. 'Mum spends her time gardening and cooking, and, with the school closed for the holidays, Father will do nothing but find fault with both.'

'Needs a top-up on his Christian virtues, does he, your old man?'

'Oh, he hates that sort of talk. You know I'm agnostic, but he's the sort of atheist who's determined to prove he's better than what he calls "bubbled believers".'

'How's he do that then?' Bill emptied his glass.

'He has all manner of strait-jacketed rules which meant I could barely roll a marble growing up. For instance, living in school we had these lovely grass tennis courts on our doorstep. Any soddin' boarder could use them on a weekend – except me. It would break

Father's moral code; he saw it as taking advantage of his position as a Senior Master. So even when the school courts were vacant I had to bus across Bristol to the public courts.'

'It's hardly eight-year-olds down the mines now, is it?'

'Fair point, Bill.' Tom slid his beer dregs down. 'Right, let's see if she's good for it.' He stepped outside and ale breath breezed back in his face.

The moment the pub door closed behind him, it opened again. 'Not a bad night,' said Bill. 'Quarter moon and Ursa Major's out.'

'We won't be needing your stargazing skills to navigate up this bloody lane!' said Tom. Caps on and jackets buttoned, the cool night air invited a steady pace.

'You navigators did a tremendous job yesterday.' With no landmarks, Bill had vectored their course by airspeed, wind direction and wind speed: dead reckoning.

'Well, the Met chaps got the wind spot on. If they were a breath out, we'd more likely have seen the reindeers in Sweden than the warships in Wilhelmshaven!' Bill, like the newspapers, made it sound so easy.

Tom nodded hello to the nightwatchman as they passed into Wyfen. Would enemy bombers ever get as far as Wyfen, Yvon and all? They veered away from the main buildings and strode across the moonlit airfield. Here, they had practised rolling the whole squadron across the field in a stepped line, tailplane to wing tip, to enable them to lift a dozen aircraft into the sky in minimal time.

314 Squadron's Blenheims were now dispersed on the western perimeter, backed up against wild hedgerows which shivered in the breeze. The dry weather had firmed up the grassed soil underfoot and eased recent take-off runs.

Tom and Bill walked past G for George, its brown and green jigsaw curves discernible through the camouflage net. They rounded the nose of K-King, and then Tom stopped abruptly and grabbed Bill's forearm. The undulating hum came from perhaps fifty feet ahead, possibly from close to the next aircraft – *their* aircraft. The camouflage netting barely disguised the markings. The squadron

code on the fuselage, 'YV', was punctuated by the RAF roundel – in effect, an 'O' – followed by the aircraft's identification letter, N for Nuts: YVON.

Unarmed and unsure, Tom led Bill into the blackened undergrowth and around K-King's tail. Cloud eclipsed moon and darkness became blackness.

What, or who, was causing the repetitive rumble from their aircraft ahead? An animal? A spy or saboteur? Or just some late work by one of the ground crew? No, not in the dark without a lamp at hand.

Cloud breathed away from moon, and Tom surveyed Yvon as best he could. Her tail jutted into a shoreline of bracken, but the growling sound came from near the cockpit. He rounded the wing, where the net touched the ground. Yvon's upward-pointing nose and her man-sized propellers lifted her veil, and the shadowed ground below her throat appeared to tremor.

While Bill skirted around to the other side of the nose, Tom made sense of the shape on the ground beneath the cockpit. He bent down, six feet short of the back of the man lying on his side. A pilot's cap lay in the dirt near his head, his broad back sported a flying jacket and his long legs kinked towards the tailplane. The man spluttered something inaudible and rolled over towards Tom. From what was now the intruder's blindside, Bill leapt on him in a flash.

'No, Bill!' shouted Tom, but Bill had pinned him to the ground.

'What the blazesh ishshish?!' said the awoken man. So he had been introduced to top-heavy Yvon.

'Come on, big bollocks,' said Bill as he hauled him to his feet. A scattergun of vomit was belched down the front of Bill's service uniform. 'Bugger you!'

'You can't *shhpeak* to me like that. Don't you know who I am?' Johnny wiped his drooling vomit onto Bill's shoulder.

# Chapter 7

*Wednesday 6th – Thursday 7th September 1939*

Their night train grated out of Lublin Station. A dumpy man stood in front of Dyta's seat, and through the darkness of their unlit compartment his leg resumed knocking into her knee. The steam engine's spluttering kettle soon settled into a rattling whir. Next stop: Lwów.

She pressed her forehead against the cool glass, but there was little to see out of the window except the occasional match head of fire and the shadowed lines of the houses and churches of suburban Lublin.

A thunderous rumble brought her mother's forearm onto Dyta's lap. At the onset of the full cannonade, her mother grabbed her hand. The pitch-black compartment of dumbstruck passengers was flashed into being by one strike then another – like lightning. A battle was raging ahead of them, and Dyta's fears were underwritten by the terrifying sensation of careering towards the firestorm.

Buffeted left and right, the train still galloped along. Knee-knocker man collapsed onto her lap; she yelped but lost the sound to louder screams.

The jolting soon stopped. But the rhythmic booming continued, and light streaked up from the ground. Knee-knocker man gathered to his feet and then declared, 'It's only anti-aircraft fire now!' Passengers chorused their relieved sighs.

Whatever danger the night sky held seemed to have passed. The atmosphere in the compartment soon recalibrated to an unnerving quiet. Dyta's journey was one of forsaken sleep and vivid reminiscences. She had left behind a city where civilians were

stopped in the street to dig barricades and tram rails were wrenched up to form tank traps. The Nazis were drawing close to Warsaw now. Government ministers had left days ago, friends had gone, and now her family had been carved apart.

As their train rolled through the night, she recalled the last conversation she'd had with her brother before she left. She asked Jerzy how he could continue so blithely, both in the wake of the attack he suffered at Easter, and now, facing war. She had considered herself mature and her older brother infantile, but his response placed years between them: 'I read something about suffering producing perseverance; perseverance, character; and character, hope. That doesn't make suffering any good, but it is making me think,' he said. 'And when you look at Poland's defiant character now, and then look back at our history, where the empires of Austria, Russia and Germany have taken it in turns to wipe us off the map, we've been bred to survive this crisis and come out all the stronger for it. Anyway, we have no choice but to try.' For the first time, she saw the man he was becoming.

Daylight poured ever-confidently into the wooden-beamed room. Irritable following another shifting night, Dyta sat up on her elbows and stared into the ruffled blankets of the empty bed abreast to hers. With no sounds of war to disturb them, so the theory ran, they would sleep safe and well. It was true that Great-Aunt Grażyna's farm, now reduced to a dozen roaming fowl and an orchard of ripening apples, would hardly constitute a Luftwaffe priority. But late last night the window of rustic optimism was shattered by her mother's announcement of a drastic new plan – new to Dyta, at least.

Magda had long finished breakfast but hovered around the table, sniffing and sighing her impatience while Dyta toyed with poached eggs and read her library book. She had slipped *Crime and Punishment* into her bag without hesitation; it was on a two-month loan, an unthinkable amount of time to spend at Great-Aunt Grażyna's. And she had known the farmhouse was devoid of reading material, for nobody literate had ever lived there.

Grażyna shunned much of the twentieth century. She lacked a telephone, and, on Dyta's previous visit, she had mocked the concept of the wireless: *'These new wires-leses? For what purpose? Music, I don't like, and the news, that don't change from month to month, never mind day to day.'* Dyta was left with one question: how would *you* know?

Grażyna bulked around her kitchen, her syntax never failing to grate on her more cultured grand-niece. 'Fresh today, those eggs. Eat up, Dyta. You'll need strength, you will.'

Dyta glared across the table at her mother and allowed no question mark to weaken a statement she'd thought she'd never make: 'We could just stay here longer.'

'Defy Father? After all the trouble he's gone to? You know he bent the rules to get us on that train down here – all of Warsaw wanted out!' Not quite all, thought Dyta.

'Great-Aunt Grażyna's staying!'

'Chicks, I've got depending on me, not to mention people, knocking on my door, they'll all be, asking old Grażyna for food and lodgings, they'll be! Anyway, I'm an old woman, Dyta. If they get through, God forbid, these German animals, you've no idea what they're all about...a nice girl like you.'

'Eat up,' said her mother. 'We're leaving after breakfast.'

'The road's windy, but in Uncle's trusty old Tatra, fine we'll be,' said Grażyna. 'And he won't be needing it where he's at!' With that, Grażyna let off an unsettling cackle; Uncle Stefan had died just eight months ago. Dyta remembered how at his wake Great-Aunt Grażyna had announced something of a triumph for rural living. 'My sister, in fact both your parents, Magda, would be longer lived if they'd stayed here on the farm. The city killed them off before their time.'

'Anyway,' said her mother, 'you got on famously with the Dąbrowskis' daughter when we all lived in Prague. She was just a couple of years older than you then.'

'Irena was four years older than me,' said Dyta, 'and presumably she still is.' Irena had always seemed to be the ballast in the



Dąbrowskis' boat, her mother never more than a screw-turn away from insanity and her father all too keen to turn it.

'Well, her father's business has done well in Romania, and there's no war on there – neutral, Dad says, so it's safe.' Dyta wasn't convinced 'neutral' and 'safe' were interchangeable terms.

'Iasi is a nice town, apparently,' said her mother, 'and not too far over the border, Dad said.' How long would her father stay in Warsaw? And Jerzy? Her stomach flinched at the thought that he could be dead already.

Grażyna clattered the lightweight Tatra truck along winding, potholed roads at discomfoting speeds. Dyta put the sickness in her stomach down to what she saw, rather than to the bumpy ride. Under an arch of grotty canvas, she bounced around in the rear of the pickup, her bottom rarely maintaining contact with her suitcase for more than a few consecutive seconds. She distracted her body from travel sickness by breathing in last looks at her country through the open back of the truck. Among the folds of undulating farmland, oxen carried home harvested corn for some, whereas others had shuttered their cottages and carted their worldly goods south through the foothills. The dividing line was patriotism: the chaff had abandoned the cause and fled, winnowed from those who worked to feed Poland with their wheat.

They pulled over behind a queue of vehicles wheezing under the midday sun. Here at the foot of the Carpathian Mountains, on the outskirts of the small border town of Kutu, lay the only bridge across the Czeremosz for a hundred miles. Why did Great-Aunt Grażyna not drive them to the *front* of the queue of traffic? Dyta passed the suitcases down to her mother, and they thanked their aunt. Mother and daughter each slung their winter coat over one arm and dragged a battered suitcase with the other.

They walked past travellers who stood feeding their cart horse or checking the straps binding trunks to the roof of their motorcar. The small talk concerned rumours of German attacks on civilian refugee convoys, although one optimistic lad believed Bucharest to

be ‘just around the next hillside’ and ‘full of jobs’ earmarked just for them. But perhaps Romania wouldn’t let them in at all? Hence, the standstill queue.

Outside the first border control hut, a smartly dressed gentleman with an adjutant at his heel remonstrated in German with a uniformed guard. As she and her mother traipsed by in search of a helpful signpost or approachable official, Dyta found herself grasping a slice of the argument.

‘We are diplomatic staff from the British embassy,’ said the gentleman, in Polish.

‘That is odd,’ said the guard, shaking his head, ‘you are the third “*British embassy*” to pass through here today. But where are all your intelligence officers, I wonder?’ She strained to hear the gentleman spit out a reply in incomprehensible English. Then he marched past the guard.

Dyta and her mother trudged on with their cases and rounded the corner of the timber hut. The breeze strengthened against them, willing them back into their homeland. They stepped into the shade of a second hut signposted for ‘Pedestrian Travellers Only’ and joined the short queue outside. From here, she could see an assortment of policemen and soldiers manning the cross-armed gate, beyond which a steel and concrete bridge spanned a mere stream. Vast like Prague’s Vltava, Warsaw’s Vistula was a river worthy of halting an army, but the commotion here on the Czeremosz gave this derisory creek a disproportionate degree of importance.

The smart gentleman and his adjutant walked towards the border gate. *A small, Polish-speaking Englishman...* could he possibly have been her father’s visitor? She feared for her father, and loved and respected him more than ever. For whatever his role, he was loyally serving Poland – not running from it.

On the step into the hut, while the middle-aged couple in front argued about the cat they had left behind, her mother rummaged through her shoulder bag with increasing animation. Dyta looked aside at a pair of capped soldiers whose backs leaned against the wall of the hut. Would they have news from the front? She knew

the British and French had done nothing while the Germans closed in on Warsaw. The German advance may not have been brought to a halt, and perhaps the bombing in Warsaw had intensified? And one man in the traffic queue had broadcast that artillery had begun pounding the west side of Lwów's city walls as he drove out the east gate that morning, so the Germans could be there at the border at any minute.

The taller soldier rolled a cigarette for his stockier friend, who took it, stepped across and held it out for Dyta. She stared at their uniforms and shook her head. His towering friend spoke Czech to him: 'You can't even attract a schoolgirl!' Her smile flattened. She had wanted to ask these soldiers if they were retreating from a battle, but now she wondered if they were still looking for their *chance to kill*? How could it be that all of her father's visitors were converging here today?!

Stood on the top step to the hut, her mother thrashed an arm towards the bridge. On the Romanian side a man stood against the open door of a black motorcar parked on the road's verge. Magda's vigorous waving was placated by the raised palm of her friend, Feliks Dąbrowski.

She grew conscious of her mother's agitation and trembled a sigh. Over the days and months to follow, when she would relive this helpless nightmare, she would try to make sense of those next few minutes. She would remember being directed into the hut and reaching the police officer's desk. Her passport was checked and all was in order...for Dyta. But her mother's passport was missing.

Her eyes met her mother's with accusing gravity. 'Where *is* it, Mum?'

Her mother stepped back from the desk and a tear crept down her cheek. 'I don't know, darling.' People in the queue behind them shook their heads and began pushing by. Her mother crouched down and emptied her shoulder bag onto the floor.

Dyta jabbed her finger at her as a teacher would a miscreant schoolchild. 'But you had it earlier, at Great-Aunt Grażyna's!'

'Yes...but now I can't find it.'

She threw open her mum's suitcase, and then her own, heaping their belongings onto the floor in the face of the officer's protestations. But the passport was not to be found. How could her mother be so careless? On her knees, Dyta began to sob.

Magda refilled Dyta's suitcase. When she would unpack later that day, Dyta would discover three envelopes concealed in her case: one, a thick cut of mixed currencies; another, family photographs; the third, her snaps of Warsaw.

Her mother took hold of her hands and hauled her to her feet.

'You must be strong.'

'I can't believe you're doing this, Mum!' Was this all an act? Dyta's heart turned in her chest and fear raged through her.

'Darling, Feliks has driven a long way today, and you'll be safe with him. I'll join you soon, with Dad and Jerzy too.'

Outside the hut, her mother hugged her for the last time. Then she pressed her arm around Dyta's shoulder. Her head bowed, Dyta was steered towards the Polish barrier, where Feliks Dąbrowski came into being. Using his open-top sports car as guarantor, he had strolled across the bridge and brushed up against the land of his birth.

Dąbrowski and her mother hastily exchanged greetings. Tears streamed down Dyta's face. His arm replaced her mother's, and he spurred her across the windswept bridge. When would she next see her mother? *If* she would ever see her...

Only as they reached his two-seater motorcar did she look back to the Polish side. Her mother strode towards Great-Aunt Grażyna's waiting pickup, now across the road from the front of the traffic queue, and disappeared inside.

Later, Dyta would understand why.