

Chapter 1

1934. The young woman, in a sleeveless white silk dress, stood at the window of a small apartment gazing out over the warm organic colours of Rome, its ancient earth and stone. It was evening, and across the roofs of buildings she saw another woman sitting at a window, level with her, looking out as she did. This other woman sat quite still most of the time, reading a book perhaps, for she glanced down at her hands now and then as if turning a page. She wore her hair in a chignon, and from the poise of her shoulders, Jean guessed that she was one of those elegant older women whom she saw making their way to the shops in Trastevere. Jean wished that she would look up, give her a wave, although perhaps that would be considered improper here in Rome. Just some acknowledgement would have satisfied her. She longed for her mother at this moment; the stranger had the same familiar imperious tilt of the head.

The apartment where Jean Batten stood was the home of Jack Reason, secretary to the air attaché in Rome. The walls were pale and sun lit up the room during the day. Otherwise, it was a plain place with little ornamentation beyond a vase or two, a pretty enough rug and some light

raffia furniture, as if the owners were used to shifting house often and everything they owned could be easily transported to some other posting. It had surprised her at first that in spite of the ancient buildings beyond, and the difference of the city, she was surrounded by the odours of tobacco and talcum powder, bacon fat and disinfectant — the smells she and her mother had been accustomed to in London, in cheap, temporary lodgings.

The trouble had begun in Marseilles, on the first day of the flight. Just a year before, she had destroyed a plane in Baluchistan, a plane that had not belonged to her. That had been misfortune, she believed, pure and simple, but this time there was no avoiding it had been her fault. The Gipsy Moth had ended up squatting in a field of grass on the edge of the Tiber, its undercarriage shattered, the wings crumpled. As she had glided through the night, with only a torch to show her the way, twisting and weaving, like a firefly in the night, she had somehow avoided tall wireless masts on each side.

It had been after midnight when she was taken to the *pronto soccorso*, a Red Cross station of sorts. The petrol tank had been empty, but then it had been for some time, and that should not have happened. How could she have been so utterly stupid? How could she have failed her mother, whom she loved more than her life, and who had given her so much? But that didn't bear thinking about. That was the dark bird perched on her shoulder, the haunted dream that made her cry out in her sleep some nights, the creature she had to kill. Her mother knew the bird was there, and

only her mother could drive it away. But she was not here, she was in London, waiting to hear that Jean had made the next stage of her journey. What she would receive in the morning was news of a disaster, one that could have been so easily averted, had Jean but listened to the men in Marseilles. Perhaps it was the city of Marseilles itself, unpredictable and dangerous, full of seafarers and gypsies, because she had not wanted to stay in the old port town for a night. But that was not true. She was scared by very little on the ground, it was only in the immensity of the air that she sometimes understood danger. And that was what had driven her on, the need to conquer fear. She had done this to herself, succumbed to her own craziness, a strange light-headed madness that leapt out of control. She should have known.

Behind her, Molly Reason entered the room. She was a plump woman in her late forties or thereabouts, with frizzy hair parted in the centre and anxious eyes, as if her guest made her nervous. She wore a floral frock, pleated over her bosom in a way that made it look heavy. Her husband had been called directly after the crash, and now he had taken charge and installed Jean in their apartment.

‘Excuse me, Miss Batten,’ Molly said. ‘The doctor is here to see you.’

Jean turned from the window, trying to conceal her regret at having her thoughts interrupted. ‘The doctor? What doctor?’

‘The one who attended you last night. He’s come to check that you’re in better health.’

As if Jean had already agreed to see him, the doctor followed Molly in.

'Doctor.' Jean extended her hand. 'It's very kind of you, but as you'll see, I'm perfectly well. Certainly much better than I was last night. Or was it early morning? I'm very sorry you were woken up so late to attend to a foolish girl like myself.' She forced a small laugh.

When they had met, her left eye was as swollen as a Black Doris plum, while her lip hung loose over her chin. The doctor had been summoned to the aid station, where she had been taken by a group of men who had found her, sodden from stumbling in the rain through marshland. As he stitched her lip together the pain was intense, but she would not cry, would not scream. This was her night of folly and whatever she might feel, she did not wish to reveal it. She knew her mother would say, 'Chin up, dear. Grin and bear.' Nellie had no time for complaints. She had, she said, suffered in her time and now that was behind her, and she and Jean could conquer the world together.

'She'll be as good as new in no time, won't she?' Molly Reason said to the doctor, in better Italian than Jean expected.

He looked at his patient with an appraising eye and spoke rapidly. The older woman lifted one shoulder in acknowledgement and seemed at a loss.

'What did he say, Mrs Reason?' Jean asked. She knew she owed it to the doctor to at least listen to his advice, for he had stayed up all night holding cold compresses to

her eye, helping the swelling to go down.

Molly Reason hesitated. 'He says the signorina is immensely beautiful, and if she looks after herself, her appearance will soon be restored. He says her hair is the colour of falling night, her skin like almond petals. He recommends, Miss Batten, that you spend a few weeks resting, and hopes that you'll remain in Rome while you recover.'

'A few *weeks*. That's ridiculous. I have to fix my plane and fly to Australia.'

'Well, the world is full of good intentions.' Mrs Reason seemed to assert herself. 'But it's hardly the first time you've set out for Australia, is it? I suggest that you climb into bed and get some rest. The doctor says you're still in shock.'

With that she turned to leave the room.

'Mrs Reason,' Jean said, 'have you not spoken with your husband today?' She chose her words with care, knowing that the other woman was not happy about her unexpected guest. Quite early in the morning she had left the apartment for Matins, and had not returned until much later.

Molly paused. 'He didn't go to church this morning,' she said, with starch in her voice.

'That's because we've been hard at work. The Italian Air Force transported my plane to the aerodrome this afternoon. They're already making a list of the parts needed to repair my machine. Mr Reason has been very kind.'