

CHAPTER ONE

Liverpool
June 21, 1916

Standing at the railing of the promenade deck, Second Lieutenant David Harrison tried to see through a blanket of thick smoke hovering over Liverpool. To the east, hundreds of coal-fired factory furnaces fed the cloud through belching smokestacks to deposit a thin film of ash across the city's narrow streets. He noted that the westward drift of the gray filth seemed to be stalled by a cool westerly breeze that filled his senses with the sharp aroma of brine and lifted sea gulls to clear sunlit skies. After a tugboat nudged the ship against a dock, stevedores quickly lashed the ship to shore and began to unload cargo.

Behind a wire fence facing the ship, a welcoming crowd waited. The hum of their voices, shouts of stevedores and piercing shrieks from sea birds contrasted with a mood of calm among the *Leviathan's* nine hundred passengers. Everyone had been at a peak of tension the night before when, lights shuttered, they had glided ten miles from the watery grave of the *Lusitania*, near Cork, Ireland. Though many people were exhausted, having never slept that night, David sensed that they all felt a common bond of gratitude for eluding the German U-boats.

Surveying the people gathered on the dock, he felt a sudden rush of irritation. Had no one been told to meet him? How would he be able to recognize anyone? As his eyes traveled over the faces, he thought there was something vaguely familiar about a lovely young woman wearing a smoky-gray dress with short sleeves and an open collar curled around her neck. From the burgundy belt at her waist, her skirt flared five inches off the ground to reveal burgundy boots. Her slender figure reminded him of Kitty Mansfield. Wistfully he wished Kitty *was* waiting for him, but he quickly dismissed that idea because he had cabled his itinerary only to his friend and mentor, Arthur Balfour, now First Lord of the Admiralty.

Then the woman suddenly looked directly at him, smiled and waved with both hands. It *was* Kitty! How could she have known exactly when he would arrive? But of course; Arthur Balfour was her bachelor uncle for whom she often played hostess. David summoned a vivid memory of the summer afternoon a year earlier when he had first met her at the vast Cecil

estate north of London. Balfour had encouraged David to confess his life-long passion for flight. Later, Kitty had arranged a state dinner, seating him next to her and *courting* him with her whispered critique of every guest. For the next ten months, they had traded letters, sharing their feelings about the war and school and life.

“What a stunner!” a deep voice spoke in his ear. “Do you know her?”

Turning, David grinned at James Rush, a youthful diplomat returning from his first posting to the British Embassy in Washington. For seven days, he had been a welcome companion at cards and meals, offering hours of advice about British customs. “I know her-- sort of,” David murmured. “I just wonder why she’s here.”

Tall and blonde in a linen suit, Rush’s yearning for the classic veneer of diplomat had been thwarted persistently by two flaws: a small head and a long nose. He had already endured a lifetime of ridicule for resembling a tall beanpole surmounted by a bowling ball with a bird’s beak. To distract attention from those genetic curses and perhaps banish from memory the abuse heaped upon him by cruel friends, he had taught himself to play the clown, seeking escape or redemption in laughter. Debating at Oxford had added sophistication to his personality, teaching him how to use his baritone voice and his fluid Gallic face to project frosty disdain or genial sympathy. But he still had not learned how to mask the truth about his feelings in his eyes, now glowing with his sense that romance was in the air. “Amusing question, old chap, but irrelevant. If I were being met by such a beauty, I’d just play the game. I mean... why your troubled frown?”

“After hours of poker, you already know I frown when I’m confused.”

Rush casually pulled a pair of Zeiss binoculars from a case which hung from his shoulder as if it were indispensable professional equipment. When questioned about his field glasses at a social event, he would answer offhandedly, “I’m passionate about birds, especially sacred cranes.” That remark coupled with his appearance had always stifled further inquiry, permitting him to carefully scrutinize whatever he might wish to report to his masters in the Secret Service. Adjusting the lenses, he scrutinized Kitty for nearly a minute. “Why don’t you disappear for an hour or so. I think I could invent a few good reasons for your sudden absence. I’ll be glad to represent you.”

David chuckled, seized the glasses and examined Kitty's lovely oval face, generous mouth, delicate eyebrows and thick auburn hair. He thought the exquisite line of her profile from high brow past a straight nose, full lips, firm chin and smooth curve of jaw to her small ears, seemed poised in graceful balance on a long, slender neck. *She's more beautiful than I remembered.* "You are such a scoundrel, Jimmy," he said. "I think you're a natural diplomat."

Rush bristled, suddenly defensive about the credibility of his cover as a foreign service officer. "What the devil does that mean?"

"You know, someone sent abroad to lie for his country," David replied, returning the binoculars.

After another quick look, Rush replaced the field glasses in their case. "I would gladly do some diplomatic lying to catch her attention. She looks absolutely radiant. Come on, tell me what's wrong with her. Is she diseased? Delhi Belly? A touch of Malay Wasteaway? Chinese Rot? Let's have it."

David felt nervously poised between amusement at Rush and apprehension that Kitty's presence might have serious, perhaps ominous implications. "It started with Arthur Balfour."

"The former Prime Minister?"

David nodded.

Incredulous, Rush asked, "What's Bloody Balfour's connection with that gorgeous creature?"

David winced at Rush's use of the epithet. As Chief Secretary in Ireland, Balfour had not hesitated to use force to pacify the Irish. "She's his niece. Her name is Kitty Mansfield. I first met her last summer at Hatfield."

Eyes eager for secrets, Rush stared at David. "Sounds promising."

A bleak expression clouded David's face. "It isn't. We come from very different worlds. From the beginning, friends warned that she was an irresponsible flirt, maybe even dangerous for a country boy like me."

“Country boy, indeed.” Rush raised his eyebrows, glanced around furtively as if sensing a confidence, grasped David’s arm firmly and steered him into a lounge. “This story is much too interesting for idle chatter on deck. We must give it the respect it deserves. Sit down here and satisfy my curiosity.”

David was grateful to be delivered from a silent staring match with Kitty. He sat down, crossed his right leg over the left and sighed. “Not much of a story. For the past ten months, we’ve just corresponded. Is that romance?”

Rush nodded reflectively, fished a cigarette from a silver case, inserted it in a slender ivory holder and lit up. “Were your letters intimate?”

“Well... I suppose so. We’ve shared our thoughts on... everything.”

“Better and better. Is she what the Chinese call a *hooah bing*, a mere flower vase. You know, all charm and no brains?”

“I told you I learned Mandarin from my mother, Jimmy. You don’t have to translate, especially when your pronunciation is so atrocious. Why do the British pronounce foreign phrases as if foreigners can’t speak their own language properly? ‘Hooah bing’ indeed.”

“Sorry old bean. Don’t be testy. Just answer the question.”

“No, she isn’t a *hua p’ing*. She’s just delightfully... whimsical. She can shriek like a mindless child while racing a horse across her father’s estate. Then that evening, she can turn into a mature hostess, managing the butler, housekeeper and staff to preside over a regal dinner for Balfour’s high-ranking friends. Her emotional span is....”

“Entertaining, maybe breathtaking, sounds like,” Rush interrupted eagerly, his eyes bright with interest. “So she’s rich! I say, you’d be a damned fool to let her get away. Does she care for you?”

“Who knows? A year ago, she acted like a little girl, like I was something special. Since then I’m afraid she’s become a woman.”

With a knowing grin, Rush pointed his cigarette holder at David. “Why you sound intimidated! You remind me of the young Christian in *Cyrano*. Come to think of it, I may be ideally qualified to come to your rescue.” He inserted a cigarette holder in his mouth, inhaled, studied David for a moment and blew a perfect smoke ring. “Allow me to count your assets. Tall, bronzed, square jaw, raven hair. Your bushy eyebrows are your best feature. I dare say women think you’re dashed good looking. Your flaws? Hmm. Your eyes are too honest; no, too... calculating. My problem as well. You’re a bit too serious for some tastes. You should memorize a few jokes; trot them out at unexpected moments.” He took a drag on his cigarette, blew a ring, frowned suddenly, shook his head as if irritated with himself and concluded, “No good. You’re not a wisecracking jokester. That’s my game. Just a mask, but it puts people at ease. Your sense of humor is either non-existent or too deep. Something in your childhood? Never mind. I sense that you’re nervous about meeting Miss Kitty. Why?”

David squirmed uncomfortably at Rush’s scrutiny. “First, women are a complete mystery to me. Always have been. Second, I usually felt especially inept around Kitty. She’s... high energy, a thoroughbred. I’m more of a stolid old plow horse. I can’t imagine what she sees in me.”

“She probably thinks you’re a daring young man on a flying trapeze. To be credible you must experiment with romance... and mystery.”

David damned himself for blushing. “You mean a flirtation. Jimmy, I simply couldn’t handle it. Anyway, I don’t have the time; I feel tremendous pressure to get ready for France.”

Rush nodded as he snuffed out the cigarette in an ash tray and pocketed the holder. “No time for flirtation? That’s like saying you have no time for life. What’s the matter with you? Are you a prude?”

“Maybe. But that’s beside the point. I told you about my mission. Major Billy Mitchell is responsible for organizing our new Air Service. He wants me to evaluate the Royal Flying Corps: students, veteran aviators, aeroplanes, armaments, tactical doctrine, training... everything!”

Rush’s hunger for a scoop suddenly went to professional alert. Had David just given him a vital clue to a question on every Foreign Minister’s mind? “Do you think the United States may come into the war soon?”

David had to admit that the intricacies of American politics baffled him. “Personally I don’t think most Americans are ready for war. I’ll bet anti-war Progressives like my mother will abandon the Republican Party in droves to flock to Wilson.”

“What do you think will be Wilson’s platform?” Rush asked.

“They raised his standard on the first night of the convention in St. Louis,” David answered. “I read it in the papers just before we sailed. Some New York Congressman coined the battle cry, ‘He kept us out of war’.”

“So you probably still have time,” Rush said with a sly smile. “Why not live a little before you hurl yourself into your great mission?”

Live a little? David suddenly saw his life in stark terms, a persistent conflict between duty and family. His choice had always favored duty. At home in Hammondsport, New York, in the summer of 1914 while he was on leave from West Point, he had chosen Major Billy Mitchell’s invitation to Washington instead of a pleasant summer of romance and flying with his fiancé, Mary Walsh. Nine months after Mary died in a flying accident that summer, he had almost transformed a childhood friendship with Mei-yin Wang into a frail romance until he again heeded Mitchell’s call for help, choosing a voyage to Europe in the summer of 1915 without consulting first with Mei-yin. Could the fates be testing him again? Staring at Rush, he felt his eyes grow cold and his mouth turn hard. “Never mind my mission. Let’s get down to brass tacks. My real ambition is to become the best combat pilot in France. This is my big chance. To get ready, I’ll need every minute in the air or on the ground with veteran aviators.”

“But you said you already have over six hundred hours in your logbooks.”

David shook his head. “All in Curtiss pushers, primitive bird-cages. Except for an hour in a *Jenny* three months ago, I haven’t flown since 1914. And that was just sport. The game in France isn’t sport. I’m so stale that I wouldn’t trust myself in a true warplane. I don’t know how it feels to dive at a hundred and thirty miles per hour. I’ve never fired a machine gun or dropped a bomb. Maybe more important, I’ve never had to dodge a veteran German pilot in ‘mortal combat,’ as the press calls it.”

“How much time will you need to get ready?” Rush asked quietly.

“Never mind ‘need.’ I don’t know how much the RFC plans to give me. Last year, they sent pilots to the front with less than fifteen hours in the air. They were so poorly trained that only one in eight survived a first patrol. Their navigation was so poor that some got lost and landed in German territory.”

“Aeroplanes are faster and deadlier now than they were a year ago. Surely the Flying Corps must know that you need more training.”

“Maybe. Like I told you, I’m not very impulsive. I like to do things with cautious deliberation: lots of studying and practice. That’s especially true if the job is about survival, *my* survival. So at the beginning, I’ll want to take it step by step. Nothing too risky.”

Rush gave David a quizzical look, as if he had just made a startling discovery. “What does that have to do with a harmless flirtation?”

“After I join some squadron in France, I’d feel damned stupid if I couldn’t stand up to the Boche because I had wasted time romancing Kitty Mansfield.”

Suddenly, Rush’s mobile face grew still. Sympathy pouring from his eyes, he firmly grasped David’s knee. “Now I understand your dilemma. Let’s go down and meet the delectable Miss Mansfield. It would be a sacrifice, but maybe I can help you resolve your problem.”

