Dance with Wings

Amelia Carr

Published by Headline Review

Extract

All text is copyright of the author

This opening extract is exclusive to Love**reading**.
Please print off and read at your leisure.

Copyright © 2008 Amelia Carr

The right of Amelia Carr to be identified as the Author of the Work has been asserted by her in accordance with the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act 1988.

First published in 2008
by HEADLINE REVIEW
An imprint of HEADLINE PUBLISHING GROUP

1

Apart from any use permitted under UK copyright law, this publication may only be reproduced, stored, or transmitted, in any form, or by any means, with prior permission in writing of the publishers or, in the case of reprographic production, in accordance with the terms of licences issued by the Copyright Licensing Agency.

All characters in this publication are fictitious and any resemblance to real persons, living or dead, is purely coincidental.

Cataloguing in Publication Data is available from the British Library

ISBN 978 0 7553 4708 7

Typeset in Joanna MT by Palimpsest Book Production Limited, Grangemouth, Stirlingshire

Printed and bound in Great Britain by Clays Ltd, St Ives plc

Headline's policy is to use papers that are natural, renewable and recyclable products and made from wood grown in sustainable forests. The logging and manufacturing processes are expected to conform to the environmental regulations of the country of origin.

HEADLINE PUBLISHING GROUP
An Hachette Livre UK Company
338 Euston Road
London NW1 3BH

www.headline.co.uk
www.hachettelivre.co.uk

Part One

The Present

SARAH

How much do you really know about your own family – about anyone, really? No matter how close we are to another person, there are always the secrets locked away that we know nothing about – the dreams and the fears, the passions and the resentments. The memories that are taken out and pored over only when we are quite alone, the dark thoughts that haunt us in the dead of night, the fears of inadequacies we never admit to out loud, the moments of despair for the future. We see only what others allow us to see, judge their actions and attitudes against our own experiences and values. And hug to ourselves secrets of our own.

Heaven knows, I've got enough of them – and I'm not noted for being the world's most discreet. When I was small I was known for a chatterbox. 'Little Big Mouth' my father used to call me – much to my chagrin – after a character in a comic I used to get from the newsagent's every Saturday morning, along with a chocolate bar or a packet of sweets. 'You are not to repeat this outside these four walls,' he would say, expressly to me, after my sister, Belinda, and I had been party to some discussion over Sunday lunch between him and my mother. As if I would! Mostly it was boring stuff like could they afford to have a makeover in the kitchen, or who'd brought what in to the charity shop where my mother worked as a volunteer. I'd roll my eyes at Belinda, who was, of course, prim and perfect as ever, and give my father a hurt look. The financing of a kitchen was the last thing I'd be likely to chatter to my friends

about, and I couldn't imagine they'd be interested in the state of the bag of clothes donated by Councillor Mrs Waite to the hospice shop either – jumpers with coffee stains and inadequately washed underwear, according to my mother. But there it was – I had a reputation for talking too much and not being able to keep secrets.

Perhaps that's why I became so good at it later . . .

My mother always was. So good that I never even knew there were secrets to be kept. People to be protected. A veneer of respectability to be maintained. Blame to be laid in private. In that dark world between sunset and dawn, when you lie sleepless and everything assumes a magnitude that daylight cuts down to size. Skeletons rattling in cupboards . . .

There are fewer of them these days, I suppose. There's no stigma attached to divorce or a child born out of wedlock. 'The wrong side of the blanket', they used to call it. How quaint is that? And yet still we have a certain light we want others to see us in. Still we care about what the truth would do to others – what sort of a world would it be if we didn't? Unpalatable truths revealed selfishly or thoughtlessly can destroy lives when uttered by grown-up Little Big Mouths.

But the flip side can be just as dangerous. Secrets kept with the best of intentions can cause trouble in the most insidious of ways that reverberate down the years. A family history can stretch out slimy tentacles into the next generation – and the next. There are things that if they were brought out into the open might lose their power, instead of thriving on the fear of discovery. If my family cupboard had been bare of skeletons some people would inevitably have been hurt. But for others, truth instead of half-truth, knowledge instead of suspicion, would have set them free.

I've always known there were things that were never spoken of. Tensions I didn't understand. Well, I've known since I was old enough to notice, anyway. That my mother rarely went home to Florida, which she'd left for England to marry my father when she was just nineteen. That she didn't often talk about her mother – my grandmother, Nancy – and never about her brother Ritchie. That she was always brittle and bad-tempered when I went for my annual holiday in the Sunshine State,

first in the care of the airline cabin staff, and later alone. I used to wonder sometimes, try to piece things together from photographs and dates and snippets of information. But I never even came close. It's only now, in the last year, that I've unearthed the truth.

And discovered that I never really knew my family at all.

Florida, Summer 2006

If there is one thing I love, one thing that can ease me out of the straitjacket of stress that I've woven for myself, thread by thread, and call my life, it is flying. You could say, I suppose, that it's in my blood, and so it is.

My great-grandparents – Grandma Nancy's mother and father – were barnstormers who performed with the air circuses that were all the rage in the States in their day – her father a stunt pilot and her mother a wing-walker. According to Nancy, she was born in a barn somewhere in the Midwest, and she was roped in as an assistant to their act when she was only four years old – hidden behind a stack of bottles and charged with knocking them down at the precise moment her father flew over and pretended to shoot at them. She'd learned to fly even before she could drive a car; she'd gone to work for Grandpa Joe, who'd been a crop-duster and was trying to expand his business, married him, and together they'd built up Varna Aviation. Oh, and just for good measure, they'd both flown in the war – Grandpa Joe with the USAAF, Grandma Nancy with the Air Transport Auxiliary in England, ferrying planes from factories to airfields or from one operational station to another.

So, yes, it's in my blood, and there's nowhere I feel more at home than in the air. Especially in Florida. I learned to fly here in the summer that I was seventeen – a much longer holiday than usual – and by the time I went home I'd not only passed all the flight tests and written exams, I'd got in enough hours' solo to earn my Private Pilot's Licence.

My mother was not best pleased. 'They knew I didn't want you messing about in planes,' she said, very tight-lipped and disapproving. And: 'Don't think you're going to be able to keep it up over here. You've got college to think about, and in any case, it costs too darned much.'

She was right there; there was no way I could find ninety pounds an

hour to hire a Cessna or a PA28, and no way she was going to help me out.

'That's how your uncle John got killed,' she'd said, as if I didn't already know it. 'I sure as heck don't want the same thing happening to you.'

John, her elder brother. Another of the flying Costellos. I didn't point out to her that the rest of them had survived into ripe old age. I knew better than to argue with my mother. But I did wonder why the bug that had bitten the rest of us had passed her by. As far as I know she's never flown, and never wanted to. There is a family story that when Grandpa Joe tried to get her into the left-hand seat for a lesson, she screamed and shouted and flounced away and walked the whole three miles home to show she meant what she said. She didn't want to learn to fly, and nothing and nobody was going to make her.

I can well believe it. My mother is the most stubborn woman I've ever met. But I can't understand how she could not want to fly. I shall never forget the excitement of walking round the plane with the wing level with my chest and the single propeller inches from my nose. Of clambering into the pilot's seat and listening to the Air Traffic Control clearing us for departure. Of the way the whole aircraft throbbed and vibrated as the engine power built, the surge forward as Grandpa Joe released the brake and we hurtled along the airstrip, gaining speed, the feeling of weightlessness when the wheels left the ground and the grass arced beneath us and the trees were a living, swaying mosaic pavement.

And most especially of the moment, ten days or so later, when I'd done enough halfway decent take-offs and landings – circuits and bumps, we called them – for Grandpa Joe to ask in that slow Florida drawl I remember so well: 'OK – do you wanna go round on your own then?' And I nodded, wordless for once, and he warned the ATC and got out of the plane, leaving me on my own. My first solo. My heart was pounding, pumping the blood through my veins as though it were a mini-tsunami, but at the same time I felt strangely calm and determined, and my hands were steady on the yoke. I knew I had to get this absolutely right. Once I took off nobody could help me. I'd have to fly a circuit and land, all by myself.

I did it. Not a perfect landing, but not bad. And my love affair with

the skies entered a new dimension. I wasn't a virgin any more. I'd gone through the initiation ceremony.

Grandpa Joe was more relieved than he'd ever let on to have me back on terra firma. There was a sheen of sweat sparkling across his forehead and up into the broad bays where his hair receded, and when he yanked the door open and leaned in to ruffle my hair the palms of his hands were sticky-moist too.

'Well done, Sarah.' Matter-of-fact tone, rough edge beneath it. 'You're a real Costello now.'

I didn't point out that I wasn't a Costello at all, that my name was Sarah Lintern, and I was English, not American. In that moment I was alive and glowing with so much pride and exhilaration that I felt it was going to burst out of the top of my head, like Vesuvius erupting. And Grandpa Joe's praise was the icing on the cake.

It was always the same; I adored him, admired him, worshipped him almost. A word of praise from him was all I needed to spur me on.

'You fly like an angel, Sarah.'

I can hear him now as I bank over the expanse of emerald and sapphire that is the Everglades and set course to head back towards Varna.

'You fly like an angel, Sarah.'

There's a shadow to my right, just out of my line of vision, and it has the rangy shape of Grandpa Joe. I can almost feel him there in the co-pilot's seat, big hands relaxed on his knees, eyes sharp and watchful; I can smell the sweet pungent briar of his pipe which he taps out and tucks into his pocket before we take off. It's five years now since he died, as quietly and considerately as he lived – just fell asleep in his chair and didn't wake up – but I still hear his voice when I'm flying. He's still there, offering me nuggets of his wisdom, chastising me sometimes as well as praising. Sitting on my shoulder, whispering into my ear. 'Always respect the skies, Sarah. If you mock them, girl, they'll have the last laugh.'

He was there when an unexpected thunderstorm caught up with me, sending torrents of rain cascading over the windscreen like a cataract, and the turbulence pitched and tossed me about like a broken butterfly. And the time when something overheated. I'd felt the radiance

on my feet and smelled the burning stronger even than Grandpa Joe's tobacco, and I'd been forced to radio in an emergency, hurry back to the airfield to be chased down the runway by a fire engine. And that was in England, for goodness' sake! Grandpa Joe isn't fussy. Where I fly, he comes with me.

Just now, he's quiet, enjoying, just as I am, the freedom that comes with floating in a bubble of silence and calm over the mangroves, lush from the summer rain. There's the constant throb of the engine, of course, the occasional rattle of the doors and windows against their frames, the soft buffeting of the wind flowing over the wings. But they're comfortable sounds, integral almost to the peace, like the soft snuffles and snores of a person in a deep and restful sleep. Like me, I suspect, he's got his eyes peeled, keeping a sharp look out for anything else that might choose to share our air space; like me he doesn't want to return to reality. But we have to, Grandpa Joe. We can't stay skulking up here for ever.

I ease back on the power and lower the nose of the Cessna. There's an arrow-straight ribbon of silver road shimmering in the noonday heat, and ahead of me the first of the Ten Thousand Islands that are scattered like a handful of beads from a broken necklace in the sparkling blue of the Gulf of Mexico. I head for the bridge, a startlingly bright white arc that links Varna to the mainland, and drop down to a couple of thousand feet, scanning the still waters that cut a hoop-shaped harbour into the island in the hope of catching sight of a manatee. No luck today. The manatees are hiding.

There's an ache around my heart suddenly. Grandpa Joe used to point them out to me when I was little, dark humps that looked like slippery boulders. But this time the ache isn't for what's gone for ever. It's for what might never be.

I want to show the manatees to a child of my own. I want to hear the intake of breath that's a gasp of excitement, see a small face alight with wonder, eyes wide, mouth an open 'O'. Even up here, in a Cessna belonging to Grandma Nancy, I can't escape the longing that's growing day by day, week by week, month by month, into an obsession.

I'm thirty-six years old. If I don't have a child soon, it will be too late. Through my own stupid fault I've let the fertile years slip away. I've

wasted them on a man I've finally accepted will never be mine, never be a father to my children, and the ones who might have been have all married other people, buried themselves beneath mortgages and piles of nappies and cosy domesticity. Ten years ago, my world hummed with spare men, even if they seemed no more ready to settle down than I was. Now there's just Fergus, and I'm not at all sure I want to spend the rest of my life with him, though he's forever trying to persuade me that I do. He's a good friend, but that's really all he is – and he wasn't even my friend first, but my sister's. Fiancé, actually. Even if I was in love with Fergus, which I know I'm not, I've had enough of Belinda's cast-offs to last me a lifetime.

But what choice do I have? Option One: marry Fergus, who I know without doubt would be good to me – a generous, reliable husband, a terrific father. Option Two: I go for it as a single mother, but not with Fergus. It wouldn't be fair to him to use him like that. I'd have to find someone I'm less involved with if I'm planning that he should be an absentee father, or maybe even go for 'donor unknown'. Neither option really appeals to me. Each time I consider either of them seriously a little bit of me shrinks away, the way you shrink from picking up a slug that's crawled under the back door and feasted on the cat's food.

But both are preferable to the alternative. Which is to accept that I am not, ever, going to be a mother. To know what it's like to give birth, to have a small firm body nestling at my breast, to experience the rush of unconditional love, to feel small fingers curling round my own, to bury my face against soft hair that smells of springtime, and know that this little life, independent now, was once a part of me and will go on being a part of me for ever. I actually want to have sleepless nights and sticky bits of food thrown on the floor and piles of socks and T-shirts and underpants to wash. And I want to sing a little one to sleep, and make muddy footprints on the windowsill to make them believe Father Christmas came in that way, and be woken at dawn to have a stocking emptied all over my bed. And see the expression of wonder when for the first time my child sees a soap bubble, a newly hatched chick, a manatee . . .

There's no time for brooding now, though. I can see Varna Airfield, a

scatter of white-painted buildings and workshops spaced along the edge of a wide expanse of green. I reduce height to just a thousand feet, reach for the handset, contact the ATC and ask permission to land. I recognise Gus Hadfield's voice. He's been doing air traffic control at Varna off and on for as long as I can remember. With his customary disregard for the correct jargon, Gus greets me.

'That you, Sarah? Thought so. OK, honey, come on in.'

There's another Cessna in the blue and white livery of Varna Aviation parked on the grass apron in front of the office buildings. As I taxi towards it, Ritchie, my mother's brother, appears round the nose. A girl is following him like an eager puppy, a pupil about to take off for a lesson, I guess – maybe her first, or even a trial flight, since Ritchie is doing the preflight walk-round with her, checking the airworthiness of the Cessna. She is perhaps eighteen or nineteen. So young! Plenty of child-bearing years ahead of *her*.

Ritchie, clad in lightweight black trousers and a white shirt with captain's epaulettes, raises a hand to me in casual greeting. Most pilots out here choose to dress informally in jeans or shorts and T-shirt, but Grandma Nancy is a stickler for protocol. A pilot should look like a pilot and not a beach bum, she says. It gives people confidence. Though he's supposedly running the business these days he's long since realised that arguing with his mother is a waste of time and energy. He draws the line at wearing a tie, though.

I wave back, but Ritchie is no longer looking. He's giving the propeller a twirl and turning to say something to the girl, who is gazing at him with rapt attention and obvious admiration. I smile and shake my head. Funny how the girl pupils always flock to Ritchie, though he's old enough to be their father – grandfather, almost! But it has to be said he cuts quite a dashing figure, youthful still, for all that he is past his fiftieth birthday. He has the rakish air of a man with three failed marriages behind him, now determinedly single, and taking full advantage of the glamorous veneer that comes with his job. I very much hope that Ritchie does not take advantage of the girls he teaches to fly, but given his track record I'm not holding my breath.

Wife number three – Mary-Lyn – was a former pupil, though she never got her licence and, as far as I know, had never even gone solo. She'd really only been interested in flying when Ritchie was in the seat alongside her, telling her, no doubt, how well she was doing whilst handling all the tricky manoeuvres himself. The lessons petered to a trickle when she got an engagement ring on her finger – a rock that must have cost him a year's salary – and stopped altogether after he'd flown her down to the Little Chapel in Vegas and she'd become the third Mrs Richard Costello.

But at least that particular bit of history is unlikely to repeat itself. However besotted this new pupil might be, however flattered Ritchie is by her admiration, with three lots of alimony to pay, and the business – according to Grandma Nancy, at least – less than flourishing these days, there's no way he is going to be able to afford diamonds and white gold and romantic honeymoons in Mexico.

I park the plane, lock up and head for the stone-built block where Varna Aviation have offices.

There's an air of affluence about the foyer these days: wall-to-wall blue carpet, soft lighting, a drinks machine, a bank of computers. When I was a little girl, the HQ of Varna Aviation was just a tumbledown hut at the edge of the field. But the town decided to invest in spanking new facilities ten years or so back and Varna Aviation benefited from them. From a business point of view it's impressive but, from what Grandma Nancy has said, the high rent payable is contributing to Ritchie's problems in keeping the business afloat.

A young man in mechanic's overalls passes me in the doorway, clutching a sheaf of paperwork. We pass the time of day and I head in across the foyer, towards the mock-pine console where Monica Rivers is working on the computer.

Monica is plump, pretty and well-groomed – big blonde hair styled the way she's been doing it since the eighties, the miraculously unlined face large ladies often have, fingernails painted shocking pink from base to tip. She's an institution at Varna Aviation; I doubt it could function nowadays without her. She started on a part-time basis in the days when Grandpa Joe was still in charge – keeping the books, organising the diary

and minding the reception desk. Her husband, an aero-mechanic and maintenance man, had died suddenly, leaving her with three young sons and only the most meagre of pensions, and Grandpa Joe had taken pity on her.

The gain was all his, though. Before long Monica was indispensable, and since her boys grew up and left home Varna Aviation is her life. She's at her desk every morning by nine and often still there at nine at night, seeing in the last pupil from an evening lesson. I have wondered if perhaps she has a soft spot for Ritchie that's kept her loyal all these years. I hope not – Ritchie really is bad news where women are concerned – and I tell myself she has too much good sense for that. But when did good sense ever win over the vagaries of the heart?

When she sees me she pushes the mouse away, clicks the computer into sleep mode and sits back in her comfortable swivel chair.

'You're back then, Sarah. Good flight?'

'Yes, great.'

'Want a coffee?'

'Love one. I'll get it when I've done my paperwork.'

'No, you're OK. I need the exercise.' Monica heaves herself up and heads for the coffee machine and I lean across the desk for the plane log and start filling it in.

Before I've quite finished she's back, setting one steaming paper mug down beside me and carrying the other round to her own side of the desk.

'So how long is it now before you go home?' she asks.

'Just a couple of days.' There's a slight sinking feeling in my stomach as I say it. The three weeks I've been here have flown – they always do. When I first arrive the days spread out ahead of me seem endless, then suddenly they're gone and I'm counting down the number of times I'll eat breakfast and dinner with Grandma Nancy, the number of times I can fly the Cessna out over the Everglades or down to the Keys before it's time to pack my bags.

Long enough, though, three weeks. You can't put your life on hold for ever, however much you might wish you could.

'You should think about moving out here permanently,' Monica says

as if she's read my mind about not wanting to go home. 'Come and help Ritchie with the business. Flying has to beat . . . whatever it is you do in that office of yours . . .'

'Accounts. I'm an accountant.'

'Pretty pressured, huh?'

'You could say that.'

'And the weather here sure is a hell of a lot better than it is in England.'

'Believe it or not, I actually like the English seasons. And I can't just throw up a good job, sell my house, and move out here. I doubt the business could run to another salary and I'm not even sure if they'd want me here all the time.'

'Your grandmother would,' Monica says with certainty. 'She thinks the world of you. And it's my opinion she's lonely. I don't think she's ever gotten over losing your grandfather. And your mother living in England too. And . . . her other loss . . .' She trails off, awkward suddenly, as if she has crossed an invisible barrier into forbidden territory and knows it. 'John,' she finishes without further explanation, yanks open a drawer in the desk and pulls out a carton of Krispy Kreme Doughnuts. 'You want one?'

I shake my head. 'No, thanks.'

'Well, I do.' Monica takes a bite, feathering her chin with icing sugar. 'My day would not be complete without a Krispy Kreme Doughnut.'

Easy to see why she's put on so much weight, I think. Aloud, I say: 'She has Ritchie.'

Monica snorts and another cloud of icing sugar fans out and settles like fine snow on the black keys of the computer keyboard. 'When he's home. Which is not often, if you ask me. And when he is . . .'

'I know.' I sigh. 'They don't really see eye to eye.'

'You can say that again!' The last morsel of doughnut disappears into Monica's mouth and she licks her fingers and her pearl-glossed lips. 'Two fine people, and they tear one another apart. Now if you were back here . . .'

I laugh, amused by her persistence. 'I shall not be here. Holidays, yes. To live, no.'

'You never know, you might just meet the man of your dreams. Now he'd persuade you to stay, I'll be bound.'

I laugh again, but it sounds hollow to my ears. Without knowing it, Monica is getting underneath my skin like a prickly thorn, scratching at tender nerves I don't want to admit are there, even to myself. I'm an independent career girl. I don't have dreams about men. Not any more. The ache of yearning I get when I see a couple swinging a small child between them, each holding on to one small sticky hand, has nothing to do with illusions of romance.

Once I saw Mark and his wife, Claire, doing just that. Walking along the street with two-year-old Freddy, counting paving stones, then lifting him, his weight evenly spread between his arms, smiling down at him, laughing as he squealed with delight. Freddy was wearing a bright red jacket and red Wellington boots, and his face was rosy beneath the hood. Six-year-old Molly was holding her father's other hand, looking up to say something to him. They didn't see me, of course. I was just passing traffic. If Mark had looked in my direction he'd have recognised my car, but he didn't look. And to Claire I was a stranger, who, had she known it, knew an awful lot about her.

I knew in that moment that Mark would never leave her and the children, no matter how many times he'd promised me he would, and I knew too that I wouldn't want him to. I couldn't steal my happiness at the expense of those children. I'd never be able to live with myself if I had that on my conscience. I told myself that was it – over. It wasn't, of course; it wasn't that easy. Making up your mind to end an affair and doing it are two different things when you're in love. But it was the beginning of the end.

I don't want to fall in love again. I don't want to lose control over my life and my emotions. At least, my head doesn't want it. I'm not so sure about my heart. If I am serious about remaining uninvolved, why don't I do a deal with Fergus? Have his baby so that we can be the ones swinging a child over the paving stones between us . . . ?

'Monica,' I say, finishing my coffee, 'I do not imagine I am going to be swept off my feet by some gorgeous hunk in the next forty-eight hours. And even if I was, I still have to go back to England.'

Monica eyes me shrewdly. I have the feeling she knows that underneath my flippancy lies hurt. That for all that outwardly I give every

indication of being perfectly satisfied with a rewarding career and all the material things my fat salary, unshared, can buy me, there's a raw empty place. That my life isn't nearly as much under control as I like to pretend. She's known me too long.

'It'll happen,' she says, 'when you least expect it.'

I grin at her crookedly. 'I'm not holding my breath.'

'Me neither.'

I look at her, at the smartly turned-out woman who's been a widow for close on twenty years and who fills the empty spaces in her life by running the office at Varna Aviation and rewarding herself with Krispy Kreme Doughnuts, and wonder if she too is secretly waiting for something – or someone. If so, she's been waiting an awfully long time.

Varna is built on a grid of intersecting roads, laid out like the squares on a sheet of graph paper, tree-lined and dotted with shopping malls and pavement cafés. But the houses, rebelling against the uniformity, are all individual in design. Some are imitation Colonial, some sprawling one-storeys, some condos. Almost all have a pool hidden away in a shady back yard.

Grandma Nancy's house is on one of the identical avenues towards the centre of town – white-stuccoed behind a neatly trimmed lawn, spacious and pleasant without being in the least ostentatious. Varna Aviation never made Grandpa Joe the bucks to move into one of the ranch-style properties on the outskirts that hide away behind acres of shrubs and get peeked at by visitors riding the town tour bus, and I don't think they'd have wanted that anyway. I pull my rental car into the driveway and go into the house.

'Grandma – I'm back!'

'In here!' Grandma Nancy's voice from the living room. It's bright and vigorous, so that it's hard to believe its owner is well into her eighties.

Grandma Nancy is pretty amazing altogether for her age. She's still spry, though she struggles a bit with arthritis in her hands and knees. She's still fiercely independent – she insisted on continuing to fly until she was seventy-four years old, and was only prised out of the captain's

seat by failing a medical on grounds of impaired hearing. And she looks good – a bone structure like hers more than compensates for the inevitable lines and wrinkles; her hair, snow white and wavy, looks as thick to me as ever it did, though she swears it's falling out by the handful – still enviably trim. But when I arrived two and a half weeks ago I thought she was somehow more frail than she had been last year. Nothing I could put my finger on, exactly, yet unavoidable, and it opened up a hollow somewhere inside me. Grandma Nancy was growing old. *Was* old, for goodness' sake, by most people's standards. And I couldn't bear it.

She's sitting at the table now. There's a book, desk-diary size, open in front of her, a photograph wallet and a small square leather box at her elbow. She closes the book, looks up at me and smiles, that lovely smile that makes her eyes sparkle blue as the sea when the sun turns it sapphire at midday and lifts her cheeks up to those amazing cheekbones.

'Did you have a nice flight?'

'Great,' I say. 'You should have come with me.'

She stacks the photograph wallet and the leather box on top of the book, which I can see has a label stuck on to its cover, yellowing now and curling back at one corner where the paste that holds it has dried out.

'Perhaps I will before you go home,' she says.

'You're sure you trust me?'

'I've flown with a lot worse pilots than you.' She meets my eyes directly, with a hint of mischief. 'Would you let me take the controls?'

I pretend to consider. 'I expect so. Just as long as you promise to fly straight and level only – none of your aerobatic stunts.'

'I think I'm a little past them,' Nancy says drily.

'I should hope so too! And you must promise not to tell Ritchie. I don't think he'd approve.'

Another wicked twinkle. 'As if I would! OK, it's a deal.' Then her face goes soft. 'You know I am so glad you take after me, Sarah. Your mother never had the slightest interest in flying. As you know, she avoids it whenever she can. I put it down to a bad fright she had when she was tiny. She was up at the airfield with us when a Cessna crashed on

take-off – a young chap trying to show off, if I remember rightly. Climbed out too steep, stalled, and came down like a pancake. Ellen was hysterical. We thought she was too young to understand what had happened, let alone remember it. But no such luck. It put her off for life.'

'She doesn't remember it,' I say. I've heard the story before, and asked her about it. 'I think if she did, it wouldn't have had such a lasting effect on her. She'd be able to rationalise it as an adult, instead of still feeling it inside like a child, if you know what I mean.'

'Maybe.' Nancy isn't one to dabble with psychology. 'Anyway, I'm glad she didn't manage to inflict her fear on you. It's a good feeling that my granddaughter will still be playing in the clouds when I'm pushing up the daisies in the Home From Home Garden of Rest.'

A goose walks over my grave. 'Don't talk like that, Grandma. You'll see all of us out.'

'I sincerely hope not!' Her face becomes serious. 'Sarah, I want to talk to you.'

'Not about your dying.'

Grandma Nancy smiles faintly. 'No. Well, not exactly. But I am getting older, and it makes you think about things you want to do before it's too late. Something I want *you* to do for me when you go home to England. Someone I want you to try to find for me.' Her fingers, a little puffy from the arthritis, stray to the book and the items stacked on top of it, holding it all together as neatly as the stiffness of her joints allows. 'Let's have a drink.'

'I just had a coffee at the airfield with Monica,' I say.

'I'm not talking about coffee. I'm going to have a sherry. The sun is over the yardarm, as they used to say in England. Why don't you have one too?'

'I'd rather have a glass of wine.'

'Well, you know where it is.'

I pour her a sherry, fetch a bottle of Californian blush wine from the refrigerator in the kitchen where it's chilling, and pour a glassful for myself over a mound of ice cubes. The ice-making compartment is practically overflowing again, creaking and clanking as it deposits fresh supplies in the dispenser.

'We'll have it outside.' Grandma Nancy is in the doorway behind me, a diminutive figure in her straight-cut linen trousers and a printed silk shirt. The blue-covered book is tucked firmly beneath one arm and she's carrying the little box and the wallet of photographs. 'Could you bring my sherry for me? I don't want to drop it. A waste of good sherry – and my best crystal.'

I go to the living room to collect Nancy's sherry and follow her outside. A table and chairs are set in the shade of a large floral umbrella; beyond the decking the obligatory pool shimmers azure blue in the bright sunshine. We sit down.

'So, what is it you want me to do?' I ask, sipping my wine.

For a moment Grandma Nancy is silent, as if she's not quite sure where to begin. Then she says: 'You know I was in England during the war.'

'Flying with the Air Transport Auxiliary. Yes, of course.'

But that is about all I do know. That she was approached by Jacqueline Cochran, one of the most acclaimed women pilots of her day, and asked to join the small select band of American women she was taking to England. That she was there for just over a year, delivering fighter planes for the RAF, and then she came home. The planes she talked about, and what fun she had flying them, but the reminiscences always stopped there. She's never talked about the people she knew or the relationships she must have formed and I have wondered if perhaps she was hugging to herself things that were too painful to share. Grandma Nancy can be an intensely private person. It's the same when it comes to John, her elder son. She adored him, yet she rarely if ever mentions him. She guards his memory within her heart.

Now I wait, curiosity burning bright, but saying nothing for fear of seeing the window close again, the shutters come down.

'We formed some very close friendships in those days,' Grandma Nancy says at last. 'Strange, really, how those people were your whole world and then . . . they're gone. The girls used to have reunions – the last I heard of was in Boston, and they wanted me to attend when the ATA Museum was opened back in the early eighties, but I chose not to go. Too far. Too many memories. Too damned busy! Now, though . . .

there is someone I'd like to contact. There's something I want to return to him – if he's still alive. If not, his family should have it.'

Him. I paddle my finger in the rim of condensation that has pooled on the table top beneath the bottom of my glass. This has taken me by surprise. As far as I was aware Grandma Nancy and Grandpa Joe had been together for ever. Certainly she'd been working for him before the war, and afterwards they'd been married for close on sixty years.

'Who is it, Grandma?'

There's the strangest expression on her face now; her eyes have gone very far away and she's half smiling. But it's a wistful smile.

She pulls the photograph wallet towards her, slides out a print and hands it to me. It's a bit grainy and indistinct, a bit faded. But I can see it is of a young man, tall, good-looking, wearing a leather flying jacket.

'That's him. That's Mac.'

I stare at the photograph and all kinds of questions are bubbling to the surface of my mind like the gassy effervescence of a glass of champagne. But for all my surprise, all my curiosity, it never for one moment occurs to me that I am looking not just at the picture of a young pilot who figured somewhere in Grandma Nancy's past, but the face of a man who shaped and changed all our lives. And whose long shadow is still affecting them today.