After Midnight

Robert Ryan

Prologue

F/O W.L. Carr, RAAF Aus 776557, CMF Italy

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My Dear Daughter,

This is the first time I have written to you and although you are as yet too young to read it, perhaps Mother will save it up until the time comes when you can read it yourself. In two days' time it will be your first birthday anniversary – a great event for your parents. My regret is that I cannot personally be there to help you blow out your single candle but, believe me, lassie, I will be there in spirit.

I am writing this from a place called Italy which is far away from our fair land – a place where I would not be by choice so far away separated from a wife and daughter so dear to me. But I am here, precious one, because there is a war on caused by certain people who wished to rule the world harshly and despotically, imperilling an intangible thing called democracy which your mother and I thought all decent people should fight for. You will understand as you grow up what democracy means for us and how it is an ideal way of life which we aspire to put into practice.

All I ask of you, Lindy dear, is that you stay as sweet as your mother and cling tight to the subtle thing we call Christianity, which has been the core of her way of life and her mother's and mine. I hope that you will love and respect me as I love and respect my father.

That's all, young lady. Have a happy birthday – may they all be happy birthdays. I hope to be home again one fine day. In the meantime, lots of love to you and to Mother.

From Dad,

Bill Carr.

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Part One

One

Italy, 1964

For the best part of twenty years he had lain, ready for someone to find him. To begin with, he'd been well hidden in the rear of the mountain hut, with bales of straw, two sheets of canvas, a long-departed montanaro's hoe and half a dozen tree branches piled on top of him. Over time, though, several of the layers had either rotted or been taken.

A few years ago, a group of teenage boys had removed the branches to make a St John's Eve fire in the meadow outside, digging a hole for their pyre with the alp-man's rusty hoe and enjoying themselves under the darkening summer solstice sky by telling ever-scarier stories of the witches and wizards said to inhabit this wild corner of the country, until most of them were too terrified to sleep. In the morning, bleary-eyed and weary, but infused with bravado by the return of the sun, the group had walked down the trail towards the nearest village for breakfast without exploring the hut further.

The brutal winters with their icy winds and heavy snowdrifts had eroded the door of the baita, which collapsed off its hinges, permitting various animals to enter, including the last of the wolves still roaming these hills, pulling away corners of the straw and the fabric, their noses twitching as they smelled the decay beneath. Gradually, he was revealed to the world, his right hand still clenched in the fist he had made as he died, containing a last bequest to his discoverers. Except, for the time being, nobody came to claim the piece of metal he held so firmly in his bony grip.

That next winter and summer removed his remaining clothes – his boots had been taken at the time of his death, too warm and comfortable to resist – and what little flesh was left clinging to the bones. His left arm was torn off and carried away by scavengers, which also removed his mandible and several ribs. He lay there now, a yellow-brown collection of bones, slowly collapsing into himself as the rest of his ligaments and cartilage dissolved.

It was this figure that the two giggling honeymooning hikers found when they peered into the hut, his head resting on his chest, as if he had nodded off. The new bride's screams echoed around the granite outcrops which overlooked the ancient alpine meadow and were lost in the mountains, much like the poor dead man's soul two decades ago.

Two

I confirmed that I was, indeed, Jack Kirby, and the Italian operator told me to wait, as she was putting an international call through. As usual, the Italian state telephone company took its time about it. I was standing at the back of the hangar, staring past

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the dark shape of my plane, out onto the mess of Malpensa airport. They were lengthening the runway so that it could take the next generation of intercontinental jets. Already there were piles of gravel and sand, and bright yellow cement-mixers and Fiat bulldozers eyed us hungrily. We'd been given notice to quit. Kirby & Gabbiano Flight Services were situated right where the smooth, shining new taxiway was to be constructed.

'Sorry, chaps,' they had said. 'We'll try and squeeze you in somewhere, but space is going to be tight.' Well, they had the choice between keeping sweet a seat-of-the-pants outfit whose main client was the University of Milan Parachute Club or preparing for the arrival of hordes of Pan Am air hostesses. I'd tried to blame them for choosing the latter, but my heart wasn't in it.

We'd been living on borrowed time anyway. We had started out in 1962 when an old US TV series called Ripcord – about a couple of skydiving troubleshooters – had been dubbed into Italian and had generated a boom in would-be free-fallers. We had what we claimed was a Beechcraft Twin Beech – in reality, its ageing AT-11 variant, an ex-USAAF trainer – which was relatively easy to convert between skydiving and regular passenger use, so it seemed silly not to take advantage of the craze, what with the university jumpers already on the airfield and short of a decent lift vehicle.

Now the boom time might be over, because the same television station was showing Whirlybirds, and everyone wanted to be Bell helicopter pilots. TV was doing that to Italy – smoothing out the regional dialects, dictating the latest trends, unifying the nation in a way no politician had managed since you-know-who. Well, I didn't have a chopper, couldn't fly one, didn't want to learn. I didn't trust anything with a glidepath like a housebrick. Or one engine.

Furthermore, Malpensa were suggesting that they didn't really want idiot parachutists dropping in, dodging the new wide-bodied jets, now they were a grown-up international airport. I'd found out that morning that the parachute group had been given its marching orders, too.

On top of that the contract with our main client, Gennaro, the Milanese food conglomerate, looked shaky. During the last run down to Rome, I had overheard two of the buyers talking longingly about the new Learjets. Fast, comfortable, with air hostesses serving drinks and no glass nose to make them look like a retired World War Two bomber. I hadn't figured out how to introduce air hostesses into the jerry-built interior of our six-seat Beechcraft. Besides, I'd have trouble balancing a Scotch, peanuts and the control stick.

There was a hissing noise on the line. 'Pronto?' I said.

'Mr Kirby?' She sounded like she was calling from the Gobi Desert. But then, I had a grappa hangover, so everyone sounded like they were speaking to me from Mongolia or beyond.

'Mr Kirby?' she repeated from her yurt.

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'This is he.'

'My name is Lindy Carr.' I tried to place the accent. It wasn't English, but then it wasn't Mongolian either.

'Hi. What can I do for you?'

'I got your name from Mr Lang.'

'Did you?' I thought he only said my name when he was in the middle of a satanic mass, performing strange rituals that compelled me to drink far more grappa than was good for my head.

'He's the Special—'

'I know who he is.' And I knew he was queer, which was fine by me, but a bit risky for a man in his position, and I wouldn't repeat that down the line. Archibald Lang was also Special Forces Adviser to the Foreign Office, the official archivist of sabotage and subversion. Which meant his job was to say to historians, journalists and families variations on: 'I'm sorry, we don't have that information' or 'Oh dear, that file seems to have been destroyed by a rather unfortunate fire back in forty-seven' or 'I'm afraid that is covered by the Official Secrets Act.' Why was he giving out my number?

I raised a hand to Furio, my partner, who was dragging his weary carcass into the hangar. A decade younger than me, he was tall, dark, without an ounce of spare flesh on him, and usually fresh-faced, but there were signs of a serious decline this morning. He steadied himself against the glass nose cone and, even in the gloom, I could see the sheen of sweat on his forehead.

Furio had started as a mere dogsbody at the outfit, but I gave him a share of the company and flying lessons after I was short for wages, hangar and landing fees one quarter, and to help me out he had borrowed the cash from his mother, a researcher on La Stampa newspaper in Turin. They now owned 24 per cent of the company.

Furio waved back at me but the effort was too much and he tottered out into the fresh air again, bent double, trying to stop himself throwing up. And I thought the young could take their drink. The previous night, we'd been in Milan, drowning our sorrows so comprehensively, we weren't quite sure what they were any more. Oh yes, I reminded myself. They're putting a new runway through our business.

'Mr Kirby?' came the voice in my ear.

'Yes? Sorry.'

'Mr Lang said you know Northern Italy very well.'

I waited while a BEA Viscount chattered its way into the air and flew directly over us, rattling the metal roof. Another threatened species. Turboprop passenger planes

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were being hunted to extinction by packs of shiny new Boeing jets. I knew how they felt. Old and in the way.

'Most of it. Which part are you interested in?'

'The lakes down to Milan, across to Turin one way, Bergamo the other. North to the Swiss border.'

I'd been there all right. Much of it was my backyard. The glass nose cone of the Beechcraft meant I was the number one choice for flight-seeing up and down the lakes. 'I'm familiar with the region. What do you need?'

'I'd rather show you in person than talk over the telephone.'

'You've been spending too much time with Lang. The only people likely to be tapping my phone are the bank, and only because they are worried about the repayments on the loan for the Twin Beech.'

'I might be able to help with those repayments, Mr Kirby. You see, I want to hire you for a few weeks. A month guaranteed, even if you end up only working a few days. But I'd like to talk about it face-to-face.'

I looked down at myself. Battered leather jacket, a stale shirt, oil-splattered jeans and dusty construction boots. I was thinking it was best to get this done over the phone, not in person. I wouldn't hire me for a month looking like this.

'When are we talking about?' I asked.

'September into October.'

I did some quick calculations. We had to be out of the hangar by November. We could pretty much guarantee skydiving income throughout the summer, and flying in the mountains in August could be tricky because of the thunderstorms. The two months she mentioned gave us a good window before the snow started. So the timing was good. If she was going to give us four weeks' work in the autumn, it'd certainly help see us through the winter and maybe into a new base.

'Where are you?' I asked, hoping she was closer than the line suggested.

'England at the moment. I will be in Italy at the end of August.'

I didn't want to leave it that long before locking this one down. Anything could happen in a couple of months. She might even find herself a proper outfit to hire. 'As luck would have it, I'll be over there in a few weeks,' I told her. 'You want to give me a number where I can reach you?' It was a London number; I was due to travel to the Isle of Man with my father, but I was certain I could add a meeting with Lindy Carr to my itinerary.

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I scribbled the number on the whiteboard with a Chinagraph pencil, right next to the reminder that the plane needed to have the main spar checked for corrosion. Rumours had spread of an imminent airworthiness directive, mandating frequent X-rays of all Twin Beech spars – including any remaining AT-11s – which had sent the value of the aircraft plummeting. That was why I could afford the plane. Mine had had its spar tubes coated with linseed oil from the get-go, and I was confident it was clean, but it was as well to be sure. When I could afford it.

I looked outside again. Furio was talking to Professore Gianlorenzo Borromini, an art historian at the university, who was one of the keenest skydivers and a founder of the club. I could see him windmilling his arms in rage, doubtless cursing the airport and all who worked for it. We'd passed that stage a few days back. All I hoped now was that my partner could resist vomiting on the Professore's well-polished shoes.

I turned my attention back to my potential fairy godmother. 'You sure you won't give me a clue what the job is?'

She said: 'I want to find my father, Mr Kirby.'

'You think he's up there in the mountains?'

'I'm pretty certain.'

'When did you last hear from him?'

'1944, Mr Kirby. He's dead.'

After a few more questions, expertly deflected by Miss Carr, I hung up feeling unsettled, but put that down to the sourness of the grappa in my stomach. Of course, I didn't know then that I was the man who had helped get her father killed in the first place.

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