AIR FORCE GIRL

CHAPTER I

Stella said for the third time: 'I wish you'd tell me where you're going this evening."

Jane leaned forward for a better view of herself in the triple mirror on Stella's dressing table. She pulled on her little new blue hat thinking that if she had only known she would not have bought it. Heaven only knew when she would have the chance to wear it again! Or the new blue dress that went with it.

"Please tell me, Jane."

Jane laughed gently. "Darling, can't a girl enjoy her last night of freedom without being asked a hundred questions?"

Stella ran a comb through her hair. She said unhappily, "I wish I didn't have to go to this wretched first night. I'm feeling perfectly miserable about you."

Jane sighed. "You needn't be. I assure you I'm going to have the time of my life."

After all, Jane reflected honestly it was entirely her own fault that she was going to spend the evening alone. There were a dozen people she could have seen if she had only chosen to make ararngements to meet one or the other of them. She knew that it was since her break with Tony that she'd found she preferred her own company unless perhaps she could be with Stella. There had been, it was true, that brief hectic affair with Clive Forbes, but the less she thought about that the better.

Jane was a fashion artist, and Stella a free lance journalist. They had shared an apartment together for some three years. Neither was making much money in those days. Jane was at the bottom of her particular ladder and Stella trying valiantly to get a foothold on hers. Little by little Jane had learned what life had done to Stella. Jane only knew that there had been a husband who had let her down so badly that he had completely robbed Stella of her belief in human nature. She had divorced him after a brief six months of marriage and even though he was fairly well off she refused to take a penny from him.

Though Stella, in her worldly contacts was hard and caustic, she had a gentle understanding side that no one else ever saw. It was Stella who saw Jane through that ghastly time when her engagement to Tony Rees was broken. It was Stella who, a year later, brought Jane up with a jolt when Clive Forbes who had been running around with her had very nearly persuaded her to slip across to Paris with him for a week-end.

She prevented it by the simple expedient of quietly appropriating Jane's passport. They had had a bitter quarrel and Jane threatened to apply for a new one, but somehow she didn't and before many days had gone by she thanked Stella, a little shamefacedly, saying that of course she'd been right. She hadn't really known what had come over her.

Now Stella would be going to live alone, and Jane would be leaving her because tomorrow she was joining the Women's Auxiliary Air Force! Always Jane had said that if war came she'd feel she must do something more worth while than sketching hats and dresses. The blitz only strengthened her determination, and at last she said to Stella, "I'm going to join up in one of the women's services. There must be some useful work that I can do."

And now there remained only this last evening of freedom.

"May I borrow your flashlight?" she asked Stella. "The battery of mine is dead."

"Yes, of course. Rupert's calling for me and he'll bring me back here. I shan't need it, Darling. I wish you'd dine with Rupert and me."

Jane shook her head. "Two's company," she said with a little smile.

She picked up the torch as she spoke, told Stella she hoped she'd enjoy the theatre, sent her love to Rupert Grant and left the apartment. Down in the hall the doorman sprang to open the door for her. "Taxi, Miss?"

"No, thank you. I'd rather walk."

She emerged into the gathering gloom of a darkening London. Nice to be living in the heart of the West End, she reflected, thinking that she and Stella had certainly progressed in their mode of living since those early days when they'd first taken an apartment together. Now they were in a modern apartment hotel a stone's throw from Piccadilly. Their combined incomes made this possible.

Jane had felt a little worried about the financial end of things when she had come back from Victory House with the knowledge that she was to report for duty so quickly. Stella had told her instantly that she was doing very well despite the war. And if things went against her—well, she'd just have to find a tenant for the apartment. Whatever happened Jane wasn't to worry on that score. What did worry Stella, was how Jane was going to manage on one and fourpence a day.

This was worrying Jane too. Still there was nothing she could do about it. What really mattered was that deep down in her heart, once she embarked on this new life tomorrow, would be the warm glowing feeling that she would be helping in her own small way in this gigantic struggle that her country was undertaking.

So intent was she on her own thoughts that she blindly turned a corner not noticing where she was going. An Air Force officer, hurrying along, head bent, collided violently with her. So sharp was the impact that the little blue hat went flying and had he not put out a swift arm to catch her Jane would have gone flying into the gutter after it. As it was she regained her balance, feeling bruised and shaken and very much as if a tank had come hurtling at her.

She reached for her hat, but he picked it up for her. "I say, I'm most terribly sorry," he said earnestly. "Did I hurt you?"

"That's all right. It was my fault really. I wasn't looking where I was going."

"That's very generous of you. But I was barging along much too fast . . ." He smiled suddenly. "To be honest I was in the devil of a temper. I was trying to walk it off."

She smiled too. "Did you manage it?"

"I'm not sure. I say, are you quite sure you're not hurt?"

"Quite."

"Well, at least you must feel a little bit shaken. You must let me get a taxi and drop you wherever it is you're going."

Jane looked at him. She remembered that this was her last night of freedom and that Stella had often said she was far too shy and retiring. She smiled. "That's very kind of you but, you see, I just don't happen to be going anywhere."

He laughed. "In that case—look, shall I tell you. You were just on your way to meet me. And I was hurrying to meet you and we were going to dine at Kettner's. I've already booked a table." He stopped a passing taxi as he spoke and held upen the door for her. "Hop in! We're going on to 'Black Velvet' after." Ten minutes later she was seated opposite him and the waiter was taking their order.

Jane took off her gloves, laid them beside her handbag on the table and said a champagne cocktail would be lovely. She hoped that he wouldn't think she was in habit of dining with strangers. He hadn't consulted her with regard to what she would eat or drink beyond one or two crisp inquiries, but the dinner he'd chosen seemed somehow to comprise all her favorite dishes.

She heard herself saying out of a blue sky, "Why did she let you down?"

His eyes darkened. "Some other fellow, I imagine. She said she had a cold." "

He said swiftly, "Gosh, I'm glad I ran into you, though it was a bit unfortunate for you!"

She laughed softly. "I could find it in my heart to wish we'd met some other way. We could have been introduced, for instance . . .

He shook his head. "That would have spoiled it all. But we can introduce ourselves now . . ."

She made a quick dissenting gesture. "No, let's just dine together, go to a theatre together and then I'll say, 'Good night and thank you very much' and that will be all there is to it."

She glanced up to find his eyes fixed on her intently. They were the bluest eyes she had ever seen.

"Why do you say that?"

She gave a little shrug of her slender shoulders. "Does that matter?"

"Yes. If we're not going to meet again, we may as well be frank with each other. We'll have to get enough for a lifetime into a very little while." He paused. Then he said gently, "Please tell me. I don't believe it's just a whim."

She hesitated. Then she said slowly, "There's a little saying, 'a burnt child . . .'"

"You're being honest."

"I was very badly burnt."

"So was I, once. This evening. The girl who let me down . . . that was nothing." He laughed. "It merely put me in a bad temper, but if I were to see very much of you . . ."

She shook her head. "You're not going to."

"Please."

"No." And more insistently, "No, no, no!" She gave a low laugh. "And that being settled, let's talk about ordinary sensible things. Tell me, do you like flying? Will it be a long war? What's your rank? Not your name—your rank."

He leaned nearer to her. "I love flying. God knows if it'll be a long war. I'm a flight lieutenant. And where shall we lunch tomorrow?"

Ignoring his last question, she said. "I see. I was wondering what those two stripes indicated. What sort of aircraft do you fly?"

"A Spitfire as a rule. I'm stationed up in the north. Now I'm down in town for a few days' leave."

He told her a lot more. He'd flown since he was twenty. He'd joined the Air Force on a short service commission and afterward had been on the reserve. He'd flown in Spain in the civil war and in China. If there was a scrap going on, he liked to be in it.

"This scrap," Jane said grimly, "seems likely to be a sticky one."

"I know. But we'll get through all right."

"I hope you will," she said, and knew that from the very bottom of her heart she meant it.

"Have you ever crashed?"

He laughed. "Lord, yes. Three times. But I have a charmed life. By rights I should have been dead long ago." His eyes met hers. "Now I know why my guardian angel was looking after me."

The color crept into her cheeks. Her hands trembled.

"You don't believe in fate?" he asked.

"Er—yes—I don't really know. I'm not sure I've thought a lot about it."

To be continued

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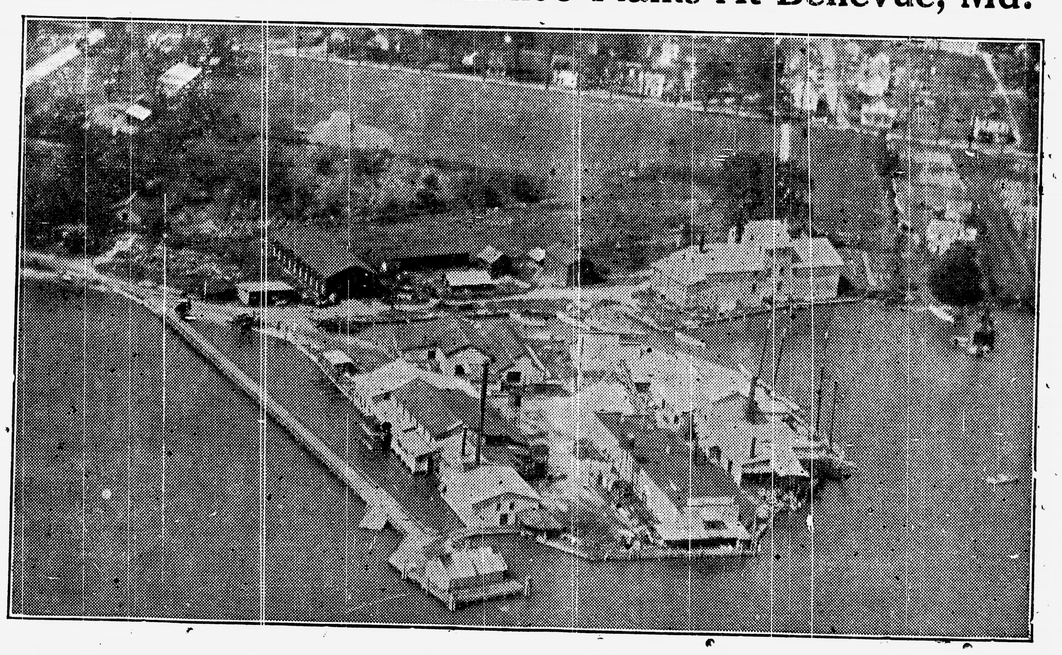

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