



Out of the Blue

Josh Lanyon

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Blurb

France, 1916. The Great War. High above the carnage in the trenches, British and German aces joust like knights of old for control of the skies. The strain and tension of living every day on the edge of death leads to dangerous choices and wild risks. When British ace Bat Bryant's past catches up with him, he strikes out in panic and kills the man threatening him with exposure. But there's a witness: the big, handsome American pilot Cowboy Cooper.

Cowboy, it seems, has his own ideas of rough justice.

Dedication

To my father, grandfather, and great-grandfather—who bravely served their country.

Chapter One

France, November 1916

“Don’t be too hasty, Captain Bryant,” Orton warned. “Not like I’m asking a king’s ransom. Not like you can’t find the ready, eh? What’s a couple a bob ’ere and there? Could ’ave gone to the major, but I didn’t, did I? Not one word to ’im about what you and poor Lieutenant Roberts used to—”

Bat punched him.

He was not as tall as the mechanic, but he was wiry and strong, and his fist connected to Orton’s jaw with a satisfying crack. Orton’s head snapped back. He staggered, tripped over something in the shadowy darkness of the stable, and went down slamming against the side of the stall.

The elderly dappled gray mare whickered softly. Leaning over the stall door, she lipped at Orton’s fallen form.

For a second, perhaps two, Bat stood shaking with grief, anger, and more than a little panic.

“Get up, you swine,” he bit out.

Orton’s head lay out of reach of the uneven lamplight, but his limbs were still—and something in that broken stillness alerted Bat.

“Orton?”

He moved the lantern and the light illuminated Orton’s face. The man’s head was turned at an unnatural angle—watery eyes staring off into the loft above them.

Bat smothered an exclamation. Knelt beside Orton’s body.

The mare raised her head, nickering greeting. The lantern light flickered as though in a draft. He could see every detail in stark relief: the blue black bristle on the older man’s jaw, the flecks of gray in his mustache, oil and dirt beneath his fingernails.

There was a little speck of blood at the corner of his mouth where Bat’s ring had cut him. But he was not bleeding. Was not breathing.

Bat put fingers to Orton’s flaccid throat and felt for a pulse.

There was no pulse.

Sid Orton was dead.

Bat rose. Gazed down at the body.

Christ. It seemed ... unreal.

He was used to thinking swiftly, making life-and-death decisions for the entire squadron with only seconds to spare, but he could think of nothing. He’d have to go to the CO. Chase would have to go to the Red Caps...

Bat wiped his forehead with his sleeve. First he’d need to come up with some story—some reason for what he’d done. Gene mustn’t be dragged into it. No one could know about Gene and him. Wasn’t only Gene’s name at stake. There was Bat’s own family and name to think of. This ... just this ... murder ... was liable to finish the old man.

He couldn’t seem to think beyond it. Disgrace. Dishonor.

He ought to feel something for Orton, surely? Pity. Remorse. He didn’t. He hadn’t

meant to kill him, but Orton was no loss. Not even an awfully good mechanic. And Bat had killed better men than Orton—ten at last count—for much worse reason.

A miserable specimen, Orton.

But you couldn't murder a chap for that.

Gaze riveted on the ink stain on the frayed cuff of Orton's disheveled uniform, Bat tried to force his sluggish brain to action. Yes, he needed a story before he went to the major. More, he had to convince himself of it—get it straight in every detail—in case he was cross-examined. Mustn't get tripped up.

If only he had ignored Orton's note ... Why the devil hadn't he?

"You waiting for him to tell you what to do?" a voice asked laconically from behind him.

Bat jerked about.

Cowboy leaned against the closed stable door. His eyes glinted in the queer light. Bright. Almost feral as he watched from the half shadows.

"Pardon?" Bat asked stupidly.

"If you don't plan on getting juggled by the MPs, you better get a move on."

It was as though he were speaking to Bat in a foreign language. Granted, Cowboy was a Yank—a Texan, at that—and did take a bit of translation at the best of times.

Bat said, "I don't—what d'you mean? I-I shall have to report this."

"Why's that?" Cowboy left his post at the door and came to join him. Oddly, it gave Bat comfort, Cowboy's broad shoulder brushing his own. Together they stared down at Orton's body.

Already he had changed. His face had a waxy, sunken look. The smell of death mingled with kerosene and horse and hay.

Bat's stomach gave a sudden lurch and he moved away, leaning over a rusted harrow. But there was nothing to vomit. He hadn't eaten since yesterday. Hadn't eaten since Gene bought his packet and crashed in flames in the woods of the estate his family once owned near Hesdin.

Instead, he hung white-knuckled onto the rough metal frame heaving dry, empty coughs and nothing coming out but a few exhausted tears. Not for Orton. For Gene.

"You better pull yourself together, boy," Cowboy told him when the worst of it was over. Listening distantly to that terse voice, Bat knew he was right. He shuddered all over. Forced himself upright, blinking at the American.

Cowboy was a big man. Several inches taller than Bat. Broad shoulders and narrow hips. Long legs. Must be the way they grew them in Texas. Cowboy certainly fit Bat's notion—based entirely on the works of Zane Grey and Max Brand—of a man of the West. He'd been attached to the RFC for about two months. Which was a bloody long time in this war. Several lifetimes, really.

The old mare stretched her long neck and nibbled at the collar of Cowboy's tunic. He patted her absently and drawled, "Orton was a sidewinder. A low-down, miserable piece of shit pretending to be a man. He wasn't even a very good mechanic. Whatever else you might be, you're one hell of a pilot. And the RFC is running short on pilots these days. Let alone aces."

Bat blinked at him, wiped his face again. He felt hot and cold, sick and sweaty. He felt as though he were coming down with something—something fatal. He was unable to think beyond the thing at their feet. "What are you saying?"

“I’m saying what the hell’s the point of you going to jail for killing that skunk? Anyway, I saw what happened. It was an accident. You slugged him and he fell and hit his head.”

“It’s still...” But he didn’t finish it. He felt a flicker of hope. “You’ll back me up then? When I go to Major Chase?”

“I don’t think you want to do that.”

Too right there. Bat didn’t. But...

“How are you going to explain what he said that got you so mad you punched him? Or what the hell you were doing meeting this time of night in the stables?”

Before Bat thought of an answer—assuming he’d have come up with one—Cowboy added, “I guess Orton ain’t the only one who ever noticed you and Lieutenant Roberts were kinda sweet on each other.”

Bat lunged, and Cowboy sidestepped, grabbing him and twisting his arm behind his back in a wrestling move they never taught in any officer’s training course Bat had received. It was fast and efficient. Pain shot through his shoulder and arm and he stopped struggling, sagging against Cowboy. The American was so big, so powerfully built, it was easy to underestimate how fast he was when he needed to be. Not least because he never seemed to be in a hurry. He spoke in a lazy drawl and moved with easy, loose-limbed grace. Even when he flew into battle, he picked off enemy planes as though he were potting birds off a branch with a rifle. As though he had all the time in the world.

Listening to the calm, strong thud of Cowboy’s heart, Bat thought dizzily that this was the closest he’d come to being in a man’s arms ever again.

Cowboy’s voice vibrated in his chest as he intoned, “Never realized you had such a temper, Captain Bryant. One of these days it’s going to land you in a fix you can’t get out of.”

Bat yanked free and Cowboy let him go.

“Not tonight, though.”

Bat rubbed his wrist where Cowboy’s fingers had dug into the tendons. “What d’you mean?”

“I mean, if you can simmer down long enough to listen, I’m going to help you.”

“Help me how?”

Cowboy wasn’t looking at Bat. He stared down at Orton’s body. Thoughtfully, as though only making his mind up to it, he said, “I’m going to get rid of him once and for all.”

“*How?*”

“Never mind how. It’ll be better if you don’t know. Go back to the mess, and make sure everyone sees you. Close the place down. Then head up to your quarters. Understand?”

The flicker of hope flared. Bat knew a cowardly longing to do exactly as Cowboy instructed. Leave it to him, go get blind drunk, then retire to bed and forget any of this happened.

He forced himself to say, “Awfully good of you, old chap, but you must see I can’t ... can’t let you do this.”

Amused, Cowboy retorted, “You don’t even know what I’m going to do, *old chap*, so why argue about it?”

He was staring at Bat, smiling that funny crooked grin of his. Bat had never noticed

how blue Cowboy's eyes were. Blue as the sky—back when the sky was empty of anything worse than clouds—light and bright in his deeply tanned face. His hair was soft gold. Palomino gold.

Helplessly, Bat said, "Why should you do this? Why should you help me? I haven't been ... it's not as though..."

"You've acted like a stuck-up sonofabitch since the day I arrived, is that what you were going to say?" Cowboy asked easily. "Not a member of your old boy's club, am I? Well, I guess it could be that I like you anyway. Or it could be having you around makes my life easier—'cept days like today when you seem bent on getting yourself blown out of the sky."

His gaze held Bat's, and there wasn't anything Bat could say. *Today*. Yes. What a long time ago it seemed.

If Cowboy hadn't been there today ... Sid Orton would still be alive.

"Git," Cowboy said softly. "I'll find you later."

And so ... Bat got.

* * * *

No. 44 Air Squadron was stationed at an old château outside the village of Embry near Calais. The château had withstood the French Revolution and the Napoleonic Wars—and it wasn't doing too badly against the 44th although the piano in the former grand salon would never be the same.

Bat heard the voices before he pushed open the door: shouts and laughter and singing. He felt a wave of grief—a longing for Gene so fierce that he stopped in his tracks, resting his head against the carved wood of the mess entrance.

Never again. Never hear his voice, never taste his mouth...

He had told himself he was prepared for it. They had spoken of it many times in that hard, light way they all spoke of the inevitable. But he had not been prepared.

He smoothed the emotion from his features and went inside.

The room was long and handsome with forest green walls and large windows facing the gardens and the aviaries that had once been stocked with exotic birds. The birds had been set free or eaten long ago, the shutters were closed and the blackout curtains drawn tight. There was an ornate marble fireplace reputedly designed by Leonardo da Vinci. The fire in the grate crackled merrily and threw warm shadows. Of the original furnishings only the piano, several needlepoint chairs, and a few watercolors had survived. They were all but invisible in the fug of tobacco smoke. The mess was packed. West and Rowbothom were tucking into eggs and bacon beneath the Iron Cross Gene and poor old Sandy had wrenched off a downed Fokker. Elliot was sleeping, a letter crumpled in one hand, an overturned glass by his elbow. Varlik and Heath were at the bar bellowing "Roses of Picardy" in accompaniment with the gramophone.

Roses are shining in Picardy

In the hush of the silver dew

Roses are flowering in Picardy

But there's never a rose like you

And the roses will die with the summer time

And our roads may be far apart

But there's one rose that dies not in Picardy

'Tis the rose that I keep in my heart.

“Bat, old son,” shouted Ambrose. “Where the devil have you been all night?”

“Oh, you know,” Bat said vaguely, dropping into the chair across from him.

Ambrose blinked at Bat over his pint. He was lanky and fair and Bat had known him since Eton, which no doubt entitled Ambrose to a few liberties. Difficult, after all, to keep any distance with a fellow with whom you’d shared smuggled bull’s-eyes at midnight, toasting your slippers on the fire grate, and bemoaning the general barbarity of Latin masters everywhere.

Ambrose said solemnly, “Don’t want to brood, old bean. Owl wouldn’t want that.”

What did any of them know what Owl had wanted or hadn’t wanted?

“No, of course not,” Bat said. He nodded thanks as MacArthur, the mess steward, brought him a pint. Mac began to mop up the new recruits, sending them off to their quarters with brusque kindness. Dawn patrol was only a few hours off.

For a time Bat sat there listening to but not taking in the comfortable and familiar ack-ack of voices. Ambrose began to quiz him about the small mirror Bat had rigged to the cowl of his plane three days earlier. The mirror offered a lovely view of the tail of his plane—and anyone coming up on it. They all experimented with ways to give themselves some edge. No secret Jerry had better planes and better-trained pilots. Gene had said—no. Better not to think of that.

Instead, Bat nodded and drank and wondered what the devil Cowboy was doing.

“Roses of Picardy” went for another spin on the gramophone.

The last hour felt increasingly unreal. Bat wondered if he was by chance even now dossed down and dreaming. He must have been mad. Mad to meet Orton at all, mad to lose his temper, mad to strike him. What had possessed him? It was not like him. At least ... not like he had used to be.

“I mean, you take all the sport out of the thing, old son,” Ambrose was telling him quite earnestly.

Bat started to laugh. He caught himself up sharply. If he started, he was liable not to stop.

Tubby yelled across the room, “Bat, we’re drinking to Owl.”

Bat’s hand clenched on his glass. He relaxed it consciously. The room fell silent—except for Elliot’s snores.

Varlik rose, drink in hand, steadying himself. He had a fine speaking voice—even three sheets to the wind. He pronounced carefully, “Here’s a toast, now! Fill the cup! Though the shadow of fate is on the wall, here’s a final toast ere the darkness fall. Fill the cup.”

There was a rumble of acknowledgment.

Bat lifted his glass, drank deeply. Managed to keep smiling.

Gradually, one by one, the other fellows began to drag themselves off to their beds. Ambrose bade Bat good night and Tubby took his place across the table. Tubby—The Right Honourable Thomas Lovesby—had also been at Eton with Bat. They had roomed together, in fact, and if anyone knew Bat, it was the man who had cheered him with contraband cigarettes when he was homesick, assured him with bold-faced lies that no one noticed that little stammer when Bat was upset, and thrown pillows at him when he snored too loudly. Not that anyone ever *really* knew anyone else, according to Gene. In the end they were all alone. Flying alone, dying alone—

Leaning forward, his elbow missing the edge of the table, Tubby just managed not to slam his chin on the tabletop. He fastened an earnest if bleary eye on Bat and said, “Thought you were done for today, old man. Fritz nearly had you. Lucky thing Cowboy moseyed along when he did.”

“Yes,” Bat replied. “Johnny-on-the-spot, wasn’t he?” He watched the steady slow sweep of Mac’s broom on the marble floors.

“Bat, you mustn’t...”

Bat leveled a look at him and Tubby’s round face reddened. “No use giving me that look, old man. I know you. Best pilot in the fuckin’ squadron. We can’t do without you.”

“Tell it to the brass hats,” Bat said, and despite his best effort the bitterness crept into his voice. “Two patrols a day with odds only five out of seven planes returning at the end of it. Has a single man in this last batch of replacements more than eighteen hours in the air? We’re all for it eventually. It’s only a matter of picking the when and where.”

“That what you were doing today? Picking the when and where?”

Bat used his sleeve to wipe away the ring of wet his glass had made on the table. “Lost my head for half a mo, I suppose,” he said grudgingly. “It won’t happen again.”

“Owl wouldn’t—”

“Don’t.”

Tubby broke off uncomfortably, and Bat summoned a smile.

“I’m all right, Tubby. Truly. No need to fuss, old thing. Just need a good night’s sleep, that’s all.”

Tubby grinned and checked his watch. “Better run to catch it then.”

“On my way.” Bat stood up, steadying himself with an unobtrusive hand on the table edge. All at once he was dead tired. Running on nerves and will for ... how long was it now? Even before Gene, really. But somehow, with Gene, it had been bearable.

“Shall I tag along and tuck you in?”

“Tongues will wag, Tubby darling. Tongues will wag.” Bat squeezed Tubby’s shoulder and left the mess.

The fliers were quartered upstairs in the old château. No question pilots lived well—certainly better than the Poor Bloody Infantry. Better housing, much better food, and an enviable degree of freedom. They didn’t live *long* as a rule, but ... a short life and a merry one, eh?

Bat went up the wide marble staircase and down a long hallway punctuated by occasional snores from behind carved doors. He had the “blue room” which looked over the shattered wreckage of what had once been the conservatory. The château had been bombed twice so far, though that was before the RFC had taken up residence.

He let himself into his quarters and went over to the bed without bothering with a lamp. It was a nice enough room: threadbare blue velvet furnishings and pale squares and ovals marking where pictures had once hung on the azure walls. It was a long time since he’d spent a night at the château. Gene never could reconcile himself to the noise and roughhousing of life on an aerodrome, and had taken lodgings in a ramshackle former hunting lodge near the aerodrome. His widowed landlady was elderly, somewhat deaf, mostly blind, and grateful for the small income. Most nights Bat had stayed with Gene in the room that had once belonged to Madame’s son—killed in the first summer of the war.

Bat tugged at his left boot, but any effort seemed too much, and he let himself fall back on the tapestry-covered bed and covered his eyes with his arm. True what he’d told

Tubby; if he could just sleep...

Once again he saw Gene's plane descending down in long swooping curves.

At first he'd thought it was all right ... Gene wasn't hit. He knew what to do. Bat had survived being shot down twice. Then Gene had looked up and waved at him. Just ... casually. *So long. I'll be seeing you.*

Bat had registered part of Gene's tail was gone, shot away, and by the time his machine dropped out of the clouds, it was in pieces and Gene was falling ... falling...

His eyes flew open and Bat sat up, breathing hard. Sleep? Not bloody likely. Not when every time he closed his eyes he saw Gene plummeting to his death.

He shouldn't be sleeping anyway. He should be dealing with the business he had faked last night. He rose, eased open the door to his room, and listened. All was quiet. Everyone sleeping—or lying awake dreading the swift approaching dawn. He shrugged back into his leather jacket, making his way softly, silently down the hall—past the bad paintings of irritable-looking French counts and countesses. Not an attractive bloodline, the Molyneuxs, but they were all done now. There was only a daughter left—fled to London.

Bat ran lightly down the grand staircase, marble steps and marble balustrade. For a moment he stood outside the open door of the mess. Tubby was still chinwagging with Mac. Good old Tubby. He could hear the clink of glasses, the clatter of dishes.

He turned, went out the entranceway beneath the enormous Molyneux crest, down the steps into a damp night perfumed with the scent of roses and wood smoke. High above, the stars blazed on indifferently like beacons on a faraway airfield, burning as they had burned since man first crawled out of the ooze. Man's first bloody mistake.

Slipping through the herb garden, he dodged the sentries without much effort, and cut across the parkland of overgrown lawns and tangled rosebushes to the road. He'd stolen this way many times and did not need the moon—that big, bright bomber's moon—to show the way.

In the meadow that now served as airstrip, the planes waited, shadowy and ghostlike in the moonlight. A crust of frost sparkled on the ground like broken stars and a hint of cordite drifted on the breeze.

Bat headed automatically for his plane. Oh, she was a little beauty! A DH-2 with 100-horsepower Monosoupape engine and a cockpit large enough to shift around in and get a good look at the sky. Not like the old crates they flew at the beginning of the war. This girl could go eighty-six miles an hour at 65,000 feet in the air.

He stroked the bat insignia—the malicious pointed grin—painted on the forward part of the fuselage, and examined the neatly mended stitching of bullet holes. The chill of metal beneath his fingertips brought it all back, and he was in the clouds once more feeling the shock of bullets punching into the left side of her. Not a feeling one ever quite grew accustomed to—assuming one survived getting hit the first time, and that was as often luck as skill. This afternoon it had been luck that had saved Bat. Knocked sideways in the sky, he'd yanked the stick, pulling her up into a steep climb as he emptied his drum into the belly of the Fokker blasting over.

He had to have hit it but the Fokker rolled out and came around again as Bat was completing his half loop. He reached the top. Spun her back into upright position only to spot—with a sickening jolt—that grinning bastard in his mirror, waiting...

The end then. That was what he'd thought. It had felt like destiny—but he dived

anyway, plunged into the blue emptiness below him like a swimmer striking into deep water. Every moment he'd expected to feel machine gun fire tearing into him, thinking that at least it would be quick. No time for regrets. No time for anything but the recognition that his number was up.

But like the U.S. cavalry, Cowboy was there, coming in fast, spitting bullets.

Bat banked sharply, gave Cowboy plenty of room, and the American sat on the Fokker's tail and strafed it.

The Fokker seemed to melt right out of the air. One minute it was there, the next it was hurtling downward amidst the long white streamers of machine gun tracers.

Cowboy drew up beside Bat and gave him that little nod. Bat nodded back and then veered right, and Cowboy sheared off to the left. But despite his brisk demeanor there was cold sickness in Bat's belly, and his hands shook on the stick. It was the shock of it, the unexpectedness of it. Not of the attack—of surviving it.

Now, remembering, it felt a very long time ago. Years ago. A lifetime before Orton. Before he had killed Orton.

He stood motionless absorbing that.

He had killed Orton.

It was unbelievable. The entire night was like some ghastly never ending nightmare.

He thought again about finding Orton's note in the pocket of his flight jacket, the scrawled slip with its misspelled demand to meet in the stable. He should have ignored it. Followed his first instinct to burn the note and forget about it. Why, *why* hadn't he? Curiosity? No, more than that. Unease. There had been something in Orton's manner for some time. Something that wasn't quite open insolence, and yet ... Yes. Something knowing and contemptuous. Instinctively, Bat had recognized it and feared the mechanic might have some evidence, some proof.

But what? They were careful. Always.

There had to be something, though. Something damning, or Orton wouldn't have dared approach a superior officer in such a manner. Something had emboldened Orton. Perhaps he'd gone to Madame's last night—last night while Bat was drinking himself insensible. And if that was the case, it was Bat's own damned fault. He should have faced it then. If he'd had the sand last night, perhaps none of this need have happened.

Instead, like a bloody fool he'd struck Orton—killed him—before finding out what the man knew. It was only too likely at this very instant a piece of incriminating evidence sat awaiting discovery by the military police when they went through Orton's personal belongings. Perhaps Orton had the proof on him when he died? Either way it was too late. Nothing to be done now.

Too late.

Leaving the airfield, Bat located Gene's battered bicycle beside one of the huts. He walked the bike to the road, mounted it, and skimmed along through the moonlight until he came to the black mouth of the tunnel of trees. As darkness swallowed him, he closed his eyes, holding the bike to the unseen road, feeling the dank cool breeze against his face, whistling in his ears. He flew along, the tires skipping off the ground here and there—

He was almost startled by the bright wash of moonlight. Opening his eyes again, he saw before him the old hunting lodge where Gene—and, unofficially, Bat—had lodged for the past year.

He'd had no real plan when he left the aerodrome—he simply needed to be moving,

not thinking, not remembering—but now he was focused on the things he must do—and do quickly. Time was against him now.

He propped the bike beneath an arbor sagging under the heavy shroud of pallid roses. He unlocked the side door. Digsby, Gene's French Bulldog, waited in the warm darkness, wriggling and whimpering as Bat stood trying to find his bearings.

Old Madame Fournier would be long in bed. The house smelled of rising bread and other pleasant things that triggered memories of a different time, of a different life.

"Hullo, Digs," he whispered. The dog darted past him looking for Gene, snuffling at the bottom of the door.

"He's not here."

Digs sat down, eyes gleaming in the shadows, and stared at him perplexed. Bat knelt, tugging the dog's ears, making a fuss of him as Gene would have done.

Madame must have been expecting him after all. She had left some kind of pie wrapped for him on the stove—squirrel or rabbit, no doubt. The woman had an astonishing way with vermin. She could probably make rat taste like fine cuisine, but he was not hungry. It was hard to imagine ever being hungry again.

Dog at his heels, he made his way silently into the sitting room. The blackout curtains were drawn, the hearth laid. He lit the tinder and as the flames caught, went to unlock Gene's desk. The clock on the mantle tolled the hour with silver chimes, a peculiarly civilized tone.

He reached into the desk drawer and pulled out Gene's journal and the long leather-bound ledger where he had jotted down his poems. Opening the journal, he flipped through the pages. Gene's writing—that firm, graceful script—was as familiar to him as his own. The words blurred and he blinked fiercely.

For a time he read by firelight. Read about the boredom and monotony of life on the aerodrome when they weren't flying. Read about the exhilaration of when they were in the air hunting. Read about that final leave together in Arras. A faint smile touched his mouth. They had walked a lot that weekend, exploring the ruins outside the village and the caves they called "Baume aux pigeons." Gene had talked about Diogenes and St. Vedast and the Vikings and the Benedictines. In the evenings they had stayed in the grand old hotels with their faded grandeur—lace-trimmed sheets and muted tapestries of noblemen hunting boars and lions and unicorns. They dined in the restaurants on chipped china and mismatched polished silver and watched each other's faces in the candlelight. For that brief time the front had seemed far away although not a night passed that they did not lie in each other's arms and listen to the distant thunder of guns.

Bat read about himself. Gene saw too bloody much. His smile faded, remembering Orton, but there was nothing here that anyone else could not read.

A photo fell out: him standing beside one of the old BE-8s.

Bat studied his own cocky grin and tried to remember being that young. Tried to remember what had amused him so. It was like looking at a stranger. He turned back to Gene's papers. What had Orton found? They were always careful, always circumspect. Always guarding their words, schooling their expressions. And shuffling quickly through the papers, Bat resolved he would not be careless in this; it was the only thing left he could do for Gene. He rose and put the journal and his own photo on the fire. The flames leapt with a hungry *whoosh*.

Quickly, he went through the poems.

Somber is the night...

A broken roof whence the rain drip, drip, drops...

Flung toward heaven's flowering rage...

He knew them all, knew every one of Gene's poems. Knew them from Gene's bellyaching about rhythm and meter and his pains to find the exact word to the final, astonishingly lovely results. Not that Gene ever considered any of these "final" results. Bat had no idea if they were any good. He wasn't sure he'd really even understood them—but he'd liked them ... very much. Anyway, if Bat didn't understand half of them, surely this lot could safely be sent back to the maiden aunt in Quebec?

He heard the drone of a plane and looked ceilingward. Digs, too, raised his head listening.

One plane.

B Flight arriving home? He listened, automatically counting. But there was only the one plane—and it was too early for B Flight to be returning to the roost.

Odd. They were sharing the drome with 19 Squadron. Perhaps it was a pilot from the other squadron returning from reconnaissance? Archie kept silent, so it wasn't enemy aircraft.

The engine faded away into silence. Digs lowered his head to his paws. Bat returned to sorting papers.

Major Chase would write the official letter. There was only the aunt left. Aunt Monique. "Aunt Moneybags" Gene had called her. Bat would have liked to write to her as well, but he couldn't seem to think of anything that an elderly woman in a faraway country would wish to hear. *You should have been kinder to that small boy. He grew up to be a fine man, a decent, brave, generous man—he should have had longer. We should have had longer...*

His fingers lingered on the fragile paper of the poem Gene had been working on that final night.

The lamps are lit and there is the thunder of guns in the east

You lay your head upon my breast and smile...

The words blurred. Christ, he was tired. He wiped his eyes.

When he opened his eyes, Digby, settled before the fire, was watching him with the steady intent regard of a dog who knows something is up.

"It was over before I knew he was in trouble," Bat told the little bulldog. "That's some comfort, I suppose."

Digs continued to stare at him, as though requiring further explanation. But there was no explanation. Nothing made much sense anymore—hadn't for a long time. The only thing that had made sense was Gene—the way they felt about each other—and most people wouldn't think that made sense either.

Quickly now, Bat went through Gene's books, and stacked them neatly on the desk. Unlike his own motley collection of paperback westerns and detective stories, Gene's library mostly consisted of history and philosophy books and a few "Georgian" poetry collections. Bat tied the books with string and picked up the photo of Gene.

Most people would have thought it a good likeness, but you couldn't tell from the photograph that Gene's eyes had been brown, not black, or that there were red glints in his hair or a pale smattering of freckles across his nose. You couldn't tell any of that. You couldn't tell from the steady way he stared back at the camera that he had a trick of

raising his left eyebrow, giving him a quizzical look. You couldn't tell from his photo ... how funny he had been; how he could always make you laugh. You couldn't tell the way his hands had felt on Bat's body or the way his hair had smelled or the way he used to whistle when he was happy.

Bat put the photo with the books, rifled through the drawers one last time, but there was nothing left. Empty wooden boxes. Nothing to hurt or disappoint here. He gathered the photos of Gene's family and the few letters from home, bound them neatly and put those with the rest of his things.

The poems ... he waited till the last. He didn't want to put them in the fire. When he read them he could hear Gene speaking each line.

Well, what do you think about this then? 'Unlucky as magpies...'

What the hell could anyone make of that? But Gene would have feared someone reading between the lines. And Bat had given his word. He rose, gently laid the thin pages across the logs and watched them catch, watched the flames turn blue and the papers blacken.

Digs raised his head and watched them go, panting softly as the papers went in a blaze, then turned to regard Bat.

His task finished, Bat stood unmoving. Was there something left to do? He couldn't think what it might be. If he'd only thought to do this last night it might have made a difference—or had it even then been too late? No use thinking of that now. In any case it would almost be a relief to put paid to all this. It seemed an awfully long time since he had truly slept. Days. The last time he'd slept, Gene and he had held each other through the night.

It seemed strange that they had no presentiment, no foreshadowing...

At last he turned, put the keys to the desk atop the stack of books, and pulled his revolver out. All the while Digs watched with bright, intelligent eyes.

"I don't think there's a way around it," Bat told him. "He'd never have tried it on if he hadn't proof, you know. It's bound to come out—and then what?"

Digs' bat ears twitched.

"Too right. If they don't hang me for murder, they'll shoot me for conduct unbecoming."

As though the dog had put forward some argument, the man said, "You know as well as I do it's the honorable thing. Be much worse the other way. Worse for everyone."

It didn't take much to pull a trigger, yet he stood unmoving as the china clock ticked away long minutes.

Madame Fournier was three parts deaf. Still, not a pleasant sight to come down to in the morning.

No. He couldn't do that to Madame Fournier who had been so kind to him and Gene.

He turned from the desk and made his way quietly through the dark house. Digs followed at his heels breathing in his enthusiastic asthmatic way.

In the kitchen Bat knelt for a moment, ruffling the silky ears.

"Cheerio, Digs," he whispered, rising. "Behave yourself."

The dog began to whine and scratch as soon as Bat locked the door behind him.

"*Quiet*, you," Bat ordered.

The grass sparkled wetly in the moonlight as he started across the lawn toward the old hexagonal gazebo.

He tried the door. It wasn't locked and it swung open onto a mostly empty room. Melancholy moonlight spilled through the broken slats in the roof illuminating a few pieces of wicker furniture and some faded cushions. The room smelled of dead leaves and dry summers. It smelled of the past. Of people and times gone forever.

"This is beginning to feel like a lost cause," someone said behind him, and Bat nearly leapt out of his skin.

Cowboy stepped out of the shadows of the surrounding trees. Bat tried and failed to think of a thing to say.

"I thought I told you to wait for me," Cowboy said, and Bat finally found his tongue.

"What are you doing here?"

"Looking for you."

"Why?"

"Told you I'd see you later."

Had he? Perhaps he had. It all felt like a very long time ago.

Bat said, "I did as you said. Then I remembered—"

"What? You had an urgent appointment with your Maker?"

"Sorry?"

"The pea shooter. Or were you planning on sittin' in the moonlight and bagging a few trench rabbits?"

Bat looked down at the Webley. He'd nearly forgotten he still held it.

Cowboy waited.

Bat jerked out, "Did you—?"

And Cowboy said easily, "Said I would, didn't I?"

He must have been more strung up than he knew because the old schoolboy stammer returned. "W-what did you do?"

"Don't fret. I took care of him."

Proof of how tired he was, Bat couldn't seem to think how to frame the question he needed to ask. Finally, he said, "I sh-shouldn't have let you. I'm grateful of course. But it was a mistake to drag you into it. I should have gone to Chase straightaway. This doesn't change anything."

Cowboy laughed. "Now there we disagree."

Bat couldn't see the joke. "Tonight," he began. "Earlier. *Why* were you following me?"

He felt Cowboy's scrutiny, although the gloom did not allow a reading of his expression. "Guess I thought you might be feeling lonesome," Cowboy said, adding as Bat opened his mouth, "and blow your brains out."

Bat swallowed hard. "That's a ... a bloody extraordinary thing to say."

"Ain't it, though?"

He heard the irony and was reminded that he was standing there clutching his service revolver.

It stung something back to life inside him. "Surely even you can understand..."

He stopped—hearing the priggishness of that—before Cowboy repeated quietly, "*Even me?*"

"I don't m-mean it that way," he said quickly. "I apologize. You've been kind in your way."

Cowboy's laugh was genuine. "That's your idea of an apology, is it? And you folks

say Americans are rude!”

Bat put his hand to his eyes. “Look, I put that badly. I mean only that ... this is my problem. Despite your ... help, I shall have to deal with the consequences.”

“By blowing your goddamned fool head off?”

“Oh, leave off, can’t you?” Bat cried. “I didn’t ask you to involve yourself. I’m sorry it happened. Damned sorry. It doesn’t change anything. If you want the truth, I can’t face the disgrace. It isn’t only me—my name. It’s my family. Gene’s name. Gene’s memory. Can’t you understand?”

“I understand Roberts is dead. His feelings don’t come into it. Are you afraid of going to prison for murder or being court-martialed for being homosexual?”

“Either. Both, goddamn it!”

“What happened to keeping a stiff upper lip? Okay, okay,” Cowboy said quickly as Bat drew himself up. He seemed to be thinking. “So you can’t live with the shame or whatthefuckever. But that doesn’t explain what the hell you were doing today, does it?”

“Perhaps you know what you’re talking about. I don’t.”

“Today. Before you tangled with Orton. What were you doing up there in the clouds this afternoon?”

Bat stared. He couldn’t understand everyone’s preoccupation with one bloody dogfight.

Cowboy said, “You didn’t know anything about Sid Orton trying to blackmail you when you were doing your damndest to get yourself blown out of the sky.”

“That’s the fucking *job*.”

“The fuckin’ job is to patrol inside enemy lines and knock down anything that gets in our way. And to do that we need every plane and every pilot.”

True enough—as far as it went.

“Not going to be a hell of a lot of use to anyone in prison, am I? Or shot.”

“You’re not going to prison—if you can keep your head. Which, I will admit, appears to be harder than I’d’ve thought given what a cool bastard you always seemed to be.”

The futility of it all overwhelmed Bat for an instant and he groaned, “What possible *difference* can it make? Today or tomorrow, the end will be the same.”

What possible difference could it make to *Cowboy*? And yet, apparently it did. He said stubbornly, “Every man counts. You know that. That’s why they keep sending up wet-behind-the-ears kids in planes made of sticks and wires. If you’re going to throw your life away, at least go out fighting. Take a few Jerries with you.”

Neither of them spoke.

On the other side of the lodge, a rooster began to crow. Better than an alarm clock, that bloody bird. It would be light in less than an hour. Another night got through; Bat felt a twinge of relief. The nights were the worst. Sunrise meant dawn patrol, and if he’d made it this far...

Cowboy said, “I’ll tell you what I think. I think you’re grieving for your—for Gene. You’re looking for a reason to pack it in.”

“That’s fucking ridic—”

“And I think if you show some of the steel you use to hold this outfit together, you’ll discover pretty quick being alive is a hell of a lot better than the alternative.”

Bat opened his mouth but he simply hadn’t the energy to fight Cowboy, and Cowboy

was still waiting. Bat said slowly, "I never thanked you for today."

"I'm not looking for thanks." Cowboy added as Bat started to speak, "Not for that. But you're right. You do owe me, and I do plan on collecting."

Bat gaped as Cowboy moved toward him in the darkness, pulled him into his arms, and kissed him.

Despite his harsh words and rough hands, it was the gentlest kiss—a warm brush of lips—like a sun-warmed blossom skimming Bat's mouth. Had it been anything else, he'd have reacted violently. As it was ... for one bewildered moment he couldn't move.

Then he drew in a sharp breath and kissed Cowboy back fiercely, wanting the feel of that hard hot mouth on his own—needing to feel, to be touched—craving it. That desperate hunger for physical contact took Bat aback, shocked him, but he couldn't help himself.

The kiss seemed endless. Cowboy's hand went to the back of Bat's neck, fastening, drawing him closer.

When he suspected he was about to die of suffocation, Bat pulled away, gasping. His heart was racing violently.

"Are you mad? What are you doing?"

"You seemed to have a pretty good idea."

Bat wiped his mouth—wet from Cowboy's hot kisses. Cowboy grabbed him and kissed him again, hard and brief. Like the final word in an argument.

"And don't forget it," he said.

They stood there breathing hard, and Bat felt raucous laughter well in his throat. The knot that had wedged itself there ever since Gene went down kept it from escaping in hysteria.

"See you at five," Cowboy said.

After the sound of his footsteps in the fallen leaves died away, Bat walked slowly back to the lodge, unlocked the door, and went inside. It wasn't until he closed the door behind him, leaning weakly against it, that he realized Cowboy had walked off with his revolver.

Chapter Two

One of the best pieces of flying advice Bat got was from his brother Algernon who flew reconnaissance at the start of the war.

“Think down to the gunners,” Algie had said. “Treat it like a game. You’re pitting your skill against theirs. It’s a kind of sport, really. And remember, a chasse machine is rarely brought down by Archie. You’re too fast for them. There are plenty of ways to outfox them. The best pilots are the best sportsmen.” He’d ruffled Bat’s hair, adding grimly, “Or the chaps who learn to stop feeling anything at all.”

At the time Bat couldn’t imagine what he meant.

The first two weeks were the most dangerous to a new pilot. They didn’t see anything—and what they did see, they didn’t understand. Shell fire scared the devil out of them and the Hun pilots they ran into were all hardened pros with several weeks’ experience in Russia or the Balkans. By 1916 the RFC was losing nearly a pilot a day; Gene worked it out once and told Bat the average life expectancy of an allied aviator was eleven days. Of course there were the old hands like him and Gene who defied the odds. But no one defied them forever.

Bat knew Jackson was for it from the moment he was up in the air. Bat had given orders to rendezvous two thousand over field and once they assembled, he’d headed northeast with the rest of A Flight falling into formation behind.

The new fliers got the oldest machines, and Jackson was in one of the battered Spads. It climbed slowly. Tubby and Varlik did their best to shepherd him along, diving under and climbing up again to keep him aligned. Ambrose was on Bat’s left, in Gene’s former position. Cowboy was a dark silhouette on his right as they reached the cloud bank and began to climb.

As they rose into the crystalline air and the rising sun gilded the fleecy floor of clouds beneath them in amber and rose gold, Bat felt an echo of the old joy to be airborne once more. All around him the rest of A Flight surfaced at widely scattered points through the rolling cloud cover. Cowboy crested on his right and gave him that little nod.

Bat nodded back. His revolver had been lying on the seat when he climbed into the cockpit that morning. Color warmed his face and he was grateful for the distance between their machines.

A Flight formed up once more and turned northward. Far below them were the green valleys, dark forest, shining rivers of France ... Then they were over the lines. Although they were too far up to hear anything one could see by the thousands of tiny bursts of light that the day’s business had already begun. Shell bursts and muzzle flashes winked and sparkled miles beneath them. But they weren’t crossing over enemy lines until the replacements had a chance to get the lay of the land; instead A Flight headed west along the sector.

The twinkling lights faded and the battlefront—a jagged, winding scar of desert slashed through the green and pastoral land—lay directly beneath them. They were now four kilometers within the French lines. Clouds of smoke bloomed like scarlet-edged roses—interrupted at intervals by puffs of black-and-white shell bursts.

A Flight turned northward and then back. Bat glanced in his mirror and Jackson was

gone.

Just like that he had dropped out of the sky.

Bat swore without heat. That was all the time to react there was for at that moment a patrol of Spads and Fokkers came out of the sun like a swarm of hornets out of their hive. The air was alive with the deafening roar of engines as aircraft maneuvered for position, climbing and dropping while all the while the webbing of white streamers from machine gun bullet tracers wound around A Flight. It was a kind of deadly ballet—spinning, diving, banking—as they dodged each other’s machines and tried to make sure they fired at black crosses and not the roundels and tail cockades of their own planes.

Bat spared a quick glance for his altimeter, temperature, and pressure dials, and when he looked up again a Fokker was coming at him, looming up like a freight train on a motion picture screen. It drove straight toward Bat, firing as it came. It was a tactic that would have succeeded with a new pilot, whether the bullets struck home or not. Bat responded with the familiar surge of cold resolve, opening the throttle and hurtling forward—and he’d have rammed the other plane if the German hadn’t lost his nerve and dived.

Making a tight turn, nearly on his wingtip, Bat shot after him and managed to settle on his tail, firing five or six rounds while the Fokker zigged and zagged until he finally lost control and plummeted down, engine smoking.

Bat looked around and saw Ambrose in hot pursuit of a Spad, machine guns blazing. Tubby was doggedly chasing another into the blue distance. Varlik was still in one piece, and Heath...

Fuck.

He caught movement out of the corner of his eye. Cowboy glided into place beside him and nodded. Bat tightly nodded back, part of his mind still on bloody Heath. But he was surprised. Generally Cowboy preferred to hunt on his own. He’d stayed with the pack today. Expecting a repeat of Bat’s shaky performance of the day before? He needn’t have worried. Bat had resigned himself to facing down whatever the day brought.

He looked again for young Jackson, hoping that he had missed him in the maelstrom of the battle, but there was no sign of the khaki and tan Spad.

Already the dogfight was breaking up; the Boche planes out of ammunition and raveled out by the wind were fleeing back to their lines. Most aerial battles didn’t last longer than two or three minutes as they only all carried enough ammunition to fire for about fifty seconds. But Bat’s fuel tank was still a quarter full, he had plenty of ammo and, unlike Cowboy’s bullet-scarred machine, his plane hadn’t sustained any new damage.

Bat signaled to Cowboy to make for home with the rest of the patrol, and gave her full rudder, heading back to see if he could spot where Jackson had gone down. There was always a chance the boy had managed to land safely.

The wind was kicking up now—rain clouds rolling in from the north. He rode the buffeting, scanning the green expanse below.

Cowboy stuck to Bat’s machine—irritating as a burr beneath one’s saddle—but Bat knew he couldn’t endanger the other pilot or risk losing his plane by trying to shake him. In any case, it wasn’t necessary for he quickly spotted Jackson’s shattered plane in an open field. It was in flames.

Bat circled round once more to see if there was any sign of life. Unsurprisingly, there

was nothing but fire and smoke. He glanced back at Cowboy, but what he could see of his face beneath the goggles was unrevealing.

He turned toward homeward once more, Cowboy trailing after.

* * * *

“So your daddy’s a duke,” Cowboy said, blue eyes watching Bat over the rim of his glass. He drank, set the glass down. His lips were wet from the ale, and Bat had a sudden, uncomfortably vivid recollection of what that firm mouth had felt like pressing his own.

“An earl, actually,” he replied quellingly.

Cowboy was not quelled.

“So what’s that make you?”

“The youngest of five sons.”

Cowboy grimaced. “What do they call you? What’s your title?”

“The Honourable, but no one calls—”

“What kind of a moniker is ‘Bat’?” Cowboy interrupted. “What’s your *name*?”

“Aubrey.”

Undisturbed by Bat’s terse response, Cowboy offered that wide, white grin.

“Aubrey? That’s sweet.”

“Go. To. Hell.”

Cowboy laughed.

They had arrived back at base after first crawl without further incident. Bat had made his report to Major Chase, grabbed a quick kip, and taken out the afternoon patrol for an uneventful foray behind enemy lines. Now A Flight was done for the day. Bat had walked into the mess with the intention of drinking himself slowly and steadily into oblivion. If Gene were alive they would have—but Gene was not alive, and somehow Bat had to unwind that screaming pitch of tension that had kept him moving for the past two days—unwind without pulling apart because in twelve hours he had to lead A Flight out again.

Captain Sears, broad-shouldered and dark with a long seam of scar down his tanned face, stopped by the table. “Hard luck about...” He trailed vaguely. These days it was always hard luck about someone or other.

Sears was 19 Squadron’s A Flight commander. He shared a friendly rivalry with Bat—Sears currently down two kills. Three if—once—Bat’s morning’s work had been confirmed.

“Jackson,” Bat supplied automatically.

“Replacements?”

“By tomorrow, according to Chase,” Bat said.

Two patrols a day, two hours each patrol. Now and again they put in as many as six hours, but Wing discouraged it. Pilots at the front were burning out fast enough and someone had to be in shape to go up every single day weather permitting.

When they weren’t flying, they slept. Or drank. Or read. Bat had grown very familiar with the works of Zane Grey and Max Brand. Some chaps played cards or wrote letters, but mostly they slept a good deal.

Sears moved off and Cowboy said, as though there had been no interruption, “So what are your brothers doing these days? One of ’em’s a big muckety-muck in the War Office, right?”

“Archie,” Bat said reluctantly. He didn’t feel like chatting with Cowboy. He didn’t want to spend any time with him at all if he could help it. He didn’t want to think or answer questions. He simply wanted to get drunk enough to sleep—to sleep too deeply to dream. “Algie and Cyril are gone—since the first year of the war. Dorian is with the Grand Fleet in the North Sea.”

“And you were at Cambridge when you decided to join up?”

“Magdalene College, yes.”

Christ. Picnics with pretty girls and punting on the Cam. Taking tea with dons and playing cricket. A lifetime ago.

“What were you studying?”

Bat shrugged a negligent shoulder. “Suppose I was eventually headed for the Foreign Office. That’s what the pater wanted.”

“You always do what the pater wants?”

Fastening a cool eye on him, Bat said, “Clearly not.”

And Cowboy grinned. He seemed—as usual—very relaxed. Bat had a reputation for being unflappable, but in fact, he lived on his nerves, and his nerves had been strung far too tight for far too long. He found this ... insouciance of Cowboy’s grating. And bewildering.

He said, “You haven’t yet told me what you did about ... him.”

Cowboy’s white grin broadened. “You don’t really want to discuss it *here*?” He glanced meaningfully around the crowded mess.

No one was paying them any mind. Varlik was once again singing “Roses of Picardy” in duet with the gramophone. Ambrose and Heath were engaged in some drinking game. Tubby was busily cheating at solitaire. Everyone else seemed riveted by the antics of a half-starved monkey that B Flight’s Berckman had brought back from leave.

Bat said slowly, “According to Sergeant Lamb, Orton is supposed to have scarpered. AWOL.”

The smile faded from Cowboy’s face. “You didn’t question Lamb about Orton?” he demanded.

Bat shook his head. “Orton was assigned to my bus. Lamb had to fill in for him. He happened to mention it.”

Cowboy was eyeing him with a dark and doubtful gaze. “You know to keep your trap shut, right?”

Bat smiled tightly, containing the flash of hostility he felt. The unpleasant idea occurred that he could not afford to quarrel with Cowboy. Could not afford to fall out with him. Not given the secret they shared.

Perhaps some similar idea cropped up in Cowboy’s mind. He said, “Why don’t we get out of here and go some place we can talk.”

It was not a suggestion. He stood, waiting. Bat stared up at him—and realized that here too he had no choice.

He followed Cowboy out of the mess, and the last notes of “Roses of Picardy” died behind them as the door swung shut.

“Let’s walk down to the lodge,” Cowboy said. “You look like you could use some shut-eye. When was the last time you slept? Really slept, I mean?”

“How is that your affair?” Bat spoke tersely, his resentment of this high-handedness

growing momentarily.

Cowboy's big hand wrapped around Bat's upper arm, warningly. "It's my *affair* because if you make some stupid mistake 'cause you're too tired to think straight, we're both sunk."

Bat roughly freed himself, uncaring of who might be watching—even knowing as he did so, that Cowboy had a point. He was too weary to be careful, his emotions dangerously near the surface, and now he was more than a little foxed. After months of hiding his feelings—from even himself—the cracks were beginning to show.

He said, "I can't stay on at the lodge. Those were Gene's digs, not mine. Not officially."

"The old lady won't care, will she? Could probably use the extra dough."

He thought of Madame Fournier's kindness—most likely due to the infirmities of age. A God-fearing woman, Madame would not knowingly have sheltered Gene and him if she'd any notion of what they got up to in that little room where her son once slept. There was always a foolish—dangerous—temptation to believe that there was understanding, perhaps sympathy, in silence when in fact all there was, was ignorance.

"I don't know," he said. "I don't care. I can't stay there now."

"Don't be too hasty," Cowboy said cryptically, in an uncanny echo of Orton's threat. When Bat stared at him, uncomprehending, he added, "A little privacy would be useful."

For what? But Bat did not ask the question. He was increasingly certain he did not want to know the answer.

They walked down to the lodge in silence filled only by the crunch of their boots and the occasional song of a woodlark.

"You think the birds talk to each other in French?" Cowboy asked, and that bit of whimsy won a smile from Bat. The walk in the cool air had helped clear his head. He forgot his earlier annoyance.

"Possibly."

Cowboy was also smiling. His eyes slanted Bat's way, and Bat felt himself coloring though he wasn't sure why. He looked away hastily. Luminous white mushrooms grew at the roots of the ancient trees forming the leafy tunnel overhead. Wild berries lined the road, glossy purple and scarlet in the gloom. It smelled richly of damp earth and moldering leaves—and the leather of Cowboy's jacket and the soap he used.

"It's a lot like home," Bat said. Or at least the home of his boyhood. "Like Kent. Feels different, though. Feels ... French." Gene had said you could see the Flemish influence in the village names and architecture. Gene would have been an architect if not for the interruption of war.

"Doesn't feel like America, that's for sure."

The red roof of the hunting lodge appeared before them, smoke drifting from the white stone fireplace. Cowboy touched Bat's arm, and they left the path and cut across the field to the gazebo where they could be assured no one would overhear their conversation.

"I shall have to think what to do about Digsby," Bat was saying as Cowboy pushed open the rickety door. "Gene's dog. I suppose Madame might keep him on—"

He broke off as startled doves took wing through the holes in the roof. The door slammed shut behind them, closing them in with the musty scent of decaying wood and dead leaves and bird nests. Cowboy's arms went around Bat.

Shocked into immobility, Bat recovered fast and shoved him away. Cowboy eyed him narrowly and then shoved back—harder—pushing Bat against the rough wall, big fists locked in Bat’s tunic, one knee thrust between Bat’s long legs.

“Just settle down, Aubrey. We’re going to do this,” he muttered. His face was dark, filled with a ruthless intensity that started Bat’s heart rabbiting.

“Like hell.” His simmering resentment crackled into life, but beneath the anger was excitement. Part of him welcomed the idea of fighting Cowboy, part of him...

“N-no,” he got out.

“Y-yes,” Cowboy mocked—but there was a bewildering thread of gentleness, as though he were simply teasing, as though they were playing.

It was confusing. He told himself what Cowboy needed was a good thrashing, and what Bat needed was to deliver it, but ... as his eyes met that dark blue gaze, he felt strangely irresolute. A peculiar languor gripped his body. Cowboy’s breath was warm against his face. His mouth tingled recalling the feel and taste of Cowboy’s, and he wondered what would happen if he let Cowboy put his hands on him. Cowboy’s groin ground against his own, Cowboy’s muscular thigh pressed against Bat’s genitals. Cowboy’s big hands moved over Bat’s chest, smoothing his uniform, feeling for the buttons.

The idea alarmed him—but not nearly as much as it should have. In fact, maybe he wasn’t alarmed so much as ... stimulated. He put his hands on Cowboy’s to stop him, but instead he was pressing those big hands closer, wanting to be fondled, caressed.

Cowboy pulled Bat close again, and Bat knew a kind of relief that he wasn’t being given a choice, that this choice was being taken from him; all he had to do was not fight too hard.

He closed his eyes, raising his face, and Cowboy began to kiss him hotly, his mouth bruising, his teeth biting Bat’s lips. Bat groaned into Cowboy’s mouth as the other man’s big hands ran over the long lines of Bat’s body, tugging at his tunic, and Bat began to tug at his uniform, wanting the bulk of cloth removed from between his arching, trembling body and the warm weight of Cowboy’s hands. His cock felt swollen, heavy, constricted within the confines of his clothing.

“Easy, easy,” Cowboy murmured, like he was soothing a nervous colt, undoing the fastening at Bat’s tunic collar, fingers warm against Bat’s throat.

Bat swallowed hard as Cowboy suddenly pressed a soft kiss in the naked hollow of his throat. He opened his eyes and Cowboy’s face was absorbed, grave. His lashes rose and he met Bat’s gaze. He seemed to be waiting for something.

What?

Seemingly of their own volition, Bat’s hands rose and he responded in kind, shoving aside Cowboy’s heavy jacket, working the fastenings of Cowboy’s tunic—careful of buttons, careful with His Majesty’s property—they couldn’t afford to explain untoward damage. Through the coarse wool of their uniforms, their groins ground urgently against each other, and then their hot mouths met again in frenzied hunger.

The night before Bat had been too startled to truly acknowledge what was happening, but now ... he was almost stunned by the intimacy of it, the silky rasp of Cowboy’s jaw against his own, the pressure of two mouths, the mingling of breath and saliva, the unaccustomed taste of another man, the slick surprise of tongue—

He was gasping for air beneath the impact when Cowboy tore his mouth away,

breathing equally hard. His hands slid down Bat's long, thinly muscled back, finding his way to Bat's waistband and fly. His hand slipped inside, rough but caressing, feeling Bat up with gentle but thorough expertise. Bat hissed but didn't speak, didn't say the words, even as Cowboy worked his way through layers of cloth to bare skin. He was longing for Cowboy to free him, to wrap his hand around Bat's rigid prick, but instead Cowboy's hard, unsteady fingers found the entrance to Bat's body.

Bat jumped. "No," he said hoarsely.

"Hell, yes," Cowboy retorted a little unevenly.

"No." And Bat started to fight him.

Cowboy let him go so abruptly Bat staggered, falling back against the wall.

"He's dead," Cowboy said. "You're still alive, whether you like it or not."

Rage washed through Bat's body. It was followed by astonished realization. "You don't understand," he said. "Gene and I weren't—we never—did that." The very idea of it made him feel very odd indeed, made his mouth dry and his legs weak.

Cowboy went so still he merged with and vanished into the shadows, leaving Bat feeling as though he were alone. It was an unexpectedly grim feeling. He managed to control his voice.

"Are you going to say something?"

"I'm not sure what to say. You must have done more than hold hands."

The bubble of emotion that never seemed to leave Bat's chest expanded and he couldn't seem to breathe. He struggled with it.

So it was mostly relief when Cowboy's powerful arms folded him close once more. "I'll never understand the English," Cowboy muttered. He bent his head and his lips grazed the nape of Bat's neck. Bat shivered and pressed his face into the strong column of Cowboy's throat.

Of course they had done more than hold hands. Eventually. Given their natural reticence—and fear—he sometimes wondered how they had got together at all. How they had ever moved from lingering glances and long talks about navigation and topography. But they had. They'd held each other, they had kissed, they had—but *this*, no. Bat, even less experienced than Gene, had suggested certain things, but Gene had been very clear. And that had been all right by Bat—he'd been slightly ashamed for suggesting it.

Heat flooded his face, which he kept buried in Cowboy's neck. "We tried to keep to the ... the Platonic ideal."

"Jesus."

"I mean, we tried—"

"I know what you mean," Cowboy said amazingly. "I read the *Symposium*. I went to Harvard."

And it was Bat's turn to be speechless. He raised his head, staring at Cowboy's face in the gloom.

Cowboy laughed. "What did you think? I rode in from the plains on Old Paint?"

Frankly ... yes. Hadn't Cowboy rather acted that way? Was it merely a pose? Or perhaps his strange sense of humor?

"Why'd you let us all think—what we thought?"

"What do I care what a bunch of English stuffed shirts think?"

Bat tried to throw him off, but Cowboy held him in place, back to the wall, and despite the cool words his hands stroked the other pilot in long tremulous caresses, warm

hands sliding down Bat's flanks and back. Bat's body responded with a treacherous weakness. He had to bite his kiss-swollen lips against the moans threatening to tear out of his throat.

"Not you. I care what you think," Cowboy muttered.

"Oh, bully for me," Bat drawled thickly. But it felt good. Very good to have Cowboy touching him. Despite his suspicion and resentment, Bat clutched Cowboy tightly, not wanting it to end, and when Cowboy's hand slid down over his taut buttocks, palming him, he tried not to tense, tried to relax. The brush of fingertips on bare skin felt startlingly nice and started a peculiar ache in his chest.

This was something he had not foreseen. That he might enjoy Cowboy's sexual trespass. That he might welcome it. He struggled with guilt and pain and loyalty to Gene while Cowboy stroked him and whispered soothing things like he expected Bat to start bucking and biting any moment.

"Yeah, you're beautiful, aren't you? Sharp and shining like the edge of the sun." He kissed the corner of Bat's mouth, his erection thrusting aggressively into Bat's groin.

And Bat began to move against Cowboy, longing for—needing more. Cowboy's finger slipped right inside his body and an odd thrill shot through Bat. He shuddered all down the length of his body and half swallowed a protest.

"Easy, easy," Cowboy whispered hotly against his ear. "You want it and you need it. Hell, we both need it. It doesn't have to mean anything more than that. Why should it?"

He kissed away any objection Bat might have made while all the time his finger kept stroking inside Bat's body, nothing tentative about that touch, fingering Bat up with tantalizing expertise while he kept him pinned against the wall, not letting him move. And Bat turned his mouth from Cowboy's and heaved in great gulps of air like he'd flown far too high, putting all thought away and opening his thighs to give Cowboy greater access.

Dear God that felt ... it made him melt inside, made him ache, made his body keen silently, desperate for more—much more. Embarrassing sounds escaped him, abject sounds, and Cowboy kissed them all away, smiling, seeming pleased as Bat grew more frantic pushing down instinctively against Cowboy's hand, trying to take his finger deeper.

When Cowboy withdrew his hand Bat was aware of stinging disappointment. But then Cowboy guided him around to face the wall, and Bat planted his hands against its splintered roughness, spreading his legs, instinctively readying himself. He was shivering in a kind of terror, knowing what must happen now, fearing it—and craving it.

He heard the rustle of cloth and then Cowboy's fingers were back but now they were slippery with oil. Blunt fingers cupped his balls, cradling them, caressing, and then one blunt finger traced the quivering entrance of Bat's body once more.

"Ready as you're going to be," Cowboy said. "Just relax ... that's it..."

Bat swallowed dryly. He knew a moment of dizzy alarm. What was he surrendering to? What liberties was he allowing Cowboy? Allowing? Too late to stop it now. He knew that.

The big American was warm and solid all down the length of his back, the open flaps of his tunic tickling Bat's bare skin as he leaned over him, his breath hot on the nape of Bat's neck, his knees pressing into the back of Bat's, hard hands locked on his hips. Cowboy's cock lanced lightly between the cheeks of Bat's arse—a trace of sticky wet—

and the implicit threat, the tease of alarmed pleasure focused Bat's thoughts. This was no betrayal of Gene. This was lust. Animal lust. Nothing to do with what had been between himself and Gene, and perhaps he did need it—this disconcerting proof that he was still alive. He didn't care if it hurt; he rather hoped it did.

Bracing himself as Cowboy's cock pushed slowly into him, Bat was astonished to find his body grudgingly accommodating the larger man's organ, though he had to grit his jaw to keep from crying out. It did hurt. Not unbearably so, however, and the pain freed him of guilt.

Slowly ... so very slowly Cowboy shoved deep into Bat's body until Bat could feel the softness of hair against his buttocks. Cowboy thrust against him once, and Bat quivered. They were locked so tight that he could feel Cowboy's heart hammering against his back.

"You want this, don't you?" Cowboy whispered, his breath hot against Bat's ear.

In answer, Bat wriggled, pushing back a little, trying to find himself a bit of room to breathe. To think. But one of Cowboy's hands moved its grip from Bat's hip, coming beneath his belly and finding his cock, closing around it with easy expertise, pumping as though caressing a rifle. That helped, and again Bat's body responded eagerly, his cock filling and lengthening once more.

Cowboy kissed the back of Bat's neck and it was sweet. Bat relaxed into Cowboy's hold, resting his forehead on the wall, smelling the biting pungency of wood and sweat.

Cowboy was thrusting into him now, slow, steady, rhythmic thrusts, his heavy cock like a piston pushing into the cylinder of Bat's body. In. Out. In. Out. It was unbelievable—unbelievable that Bat would allow this, and yet he was standing docilely permitting Cowboy to take him. Cowboy was grunting fiercely in Bat's ear and oddly it began to excite Bat: the honesty of that rough animal pleasure. He groaned into the knotholes of the paneling.

"Yeah, that's right, Aubrey," Cowboy rasped. "That's right, sweetheart. You know it, don't you? You know you belong to me now."

Bat shook his head. "Y-you're ... fucking mad," he jerked out as Cowboy shoved into him, but Cowboy laughed.

"You're only fooling yourself." He used his knee to push Bat's legs farther to give himself better access, making Bat take him more deeply, and staggeringly, Bat acquiesced, pushing back on Cowboy's engorged cock with a helpless moan.

He let Cowboy fuck him, submitted to Cowboy's rough and thorough possession until his legs felt too wobbly to support him. Then Cowboy changed his angle, drove into Bat one more time and it was like lightning striking.

A white blaze lit up Bat's body, nerves igniting. His breath caught, he shuddered all over, releasing his seed over the larger man's hand, flooded with physical sensation—and unexpected emotion. At nearly the same instant, Cowboy groaned deep down in his chest and grabbed Bat tight against his torso, spilling blood-hot semen into him. That splash of liquid heat recalled Bat to himself.

What had he done? He had given into the basest of desires. He had let Cowboy use him, mark him like a wolf spraying its territory. He knew only too well what Gene would make of such brutish behavior, and yet ... he felt very little. Perhaps he was simply numb.

Bat slumped against the wall, panting. After a time Cowboy's cock slipped out of

him.

Bat's limbs were trembling—hands too—and his cock was suddenly unbearably sensitive. The odd thing was Cowboy seemed to understand that and he became tender—almost woman-tender so that Bat could have wept with humiliating gratitude. It was unmanly but he wanted this, wanted to be gentled, cared for. He breathed quietly against his arm as Cowboy cleaned him off with his soft linen handkerchief and then tucked him back inside his trousers. Then he drew Bat against him and they sat down—half collapsing on the faded old cushions of the dilapidated furniture.

For a time they sprawled there and Cowboy rocked Bat against him in a funny soothing way. Bat closed his eyes. The traitorous wish occurred that he and Gene would have done this, and then, even more traitorously, he realized he wanted nothing more than to sleep against this strong warm body and not think anymore.

Cowboy kissed his hair and his face and rocked him some more and Bat let himself drift.

He must have fallen deeply asleep because the next thing he knew Cowboy was saying softly, "Rise and shine, Aubrey. I gotta get back and you need some real sleep."

Bat blinked at him, nodded, and sat up. He ran a hand through his hair.

"All right?" Cowboy asked, and though he spoke brusquely, there was some remaining trace of that unexpected tenderness in his voice.

Bat nodded again. He had no words to express his confusion, his astonishment at what he'd done—what they had done.

They rose and dressed quickly, and then Cowboy went back to the airfield and Bat returned to the lodge.

Madame greeted him with pleasure and Digsby with outright joy. It was not until Bat had been persuaded into sitting down and eating a bowl of hot stew that he realized that Cowboy had still not told him what he had done with Orton's body.

Chapter Three

There was no dawn patrol the next morning. The early morning rain rumbled down drowning the distant thunder of the guns and turning the château windows silver.

Bat had walked back from the lodge at first light, Digs trotting beside him. He breakfasted in the mess on croissants and hot coffee then spent the rest of the morning in the blue room napping and reading *Riders of the Purple Sage* while Digs snored next to the bed. Having slept deeply and dreamlessly the night before, Bat felt strangely peaceful now.

Just before noontime he went down to the mess. The lads—already restless with inactivity—were smoking and talking and playing cards; “Roses of Picardy” was playing as usual but for once no one was singing along.

Bat was both a little relieved and a little disappointed that Cowboy was not there. Not that he had much time to think about it. Mac was pouring him a drink as Ambrose approached with two uniformed youths in tow.

“Replacements,” Ambrose told him, with a jerk of his head. “Burns and Pickering.” To the shining-eyed fliers who snapped twin salutes and gazed at Bat with near awe, he said, “Captain Bryant. A Flight’s leader—and the best fuckin’ pilot in 44 Squadron.”

“Gentlemen,” Bat said. “At ease. We don’t stand on ceremony here.” Immediately the replacements began chattering about what an honor this was and how eager they were to begin showing the old Huns...

Bat glanced inquiringly at Ambrose who, interpreting his look correctly, said, “Eighteen hours for Burns. Pickering has sixteen.”

“But we’re fast learners, sir,” Pickering put in quickly. “Top of our class.”

“We will go up tomorrow, won’t we, sir?” Burns added anxiously.

“You’ll be going up this afternoon if the weather clears,” Bat said.

The replacements beamed and Bat nodded pleasantly, took up his glass and moved down to the end of the bar where Tubby joined him a short while later.

“You know, old man, you’re going to have to do something about Heath,” Tubby informed him.

Bat looked up from *The Sunday Times*—collected and posted faithfully from home each week by Lady Edith Rowe, the girl he supposed he would marry if he survived the war. Since that was highly unlikely, he didn’t worry much about it. Besides, Edie was a nice enough girl. A bit ... aggressive, perhaps.

“What about Heath?” Bat inquired.

“You know damn well what about it. He’s loafin’ up there. We all know it. I can’t think why you’ve let him off the hook this long.”

Bat’s jaw tightened. Yes. He knew. He could feel Heath’s fear every time they went up. He knew that sick dread well—had gone through something similar after the first time he’d been shot down.

The trick was not giving yourself time to think about it.

And of course Bat was far more afraid of letting down his family, his name, his country than of being killed. Heath—well, things were rather different for Heath.

“Are you saying I’m not doing my job?” Bat asked coolly.

But Tubby wasn't intimidated. "You know what I'm saying."

Bat finally sighed. "Right. I'll have a word with him."

Tubby nodded, and they sat for time lost in their own thoughts.

"Have you heard from Janet?" Bat inquired, shaking off his preoccupation.

Tubby opened his mouth to answer, but broke off to swing to his feet as Major Chase entered the room with a tall, gray-haired man of about sixty in a French uniform. Bat followed suit.

"At ease, gentlemen," Chase said. "This is Colonel Reynard of the National Gendarmerie."

A rare and watchful silence fell in the mess, broken only by Berkman's monkey, which apparently didn't hold a high opinion of the National Gendarmerie.

The colonel smiled faintly at the monkey's chatter. Berkman tossed his cap over the beast and it sat down, putting tiny pale hands on the sides of the cap and shifting it to see.

"Colonel Reynard has a small mystery for us," the major announced. "It appears that sometime after oh twenty-three hundred on Monday night, the nude body of a man fell from the sky and crashed through the henhouse roof of a Monsieur Dubois. Although the man wore no identity disc, he had a couple of tattoos. A skull with a dagger through its eye on one arm and a British lion on the other. I'm told these match the description of tattoos borne by Airman Mechanic 3rd Class Sidney Orton who went AWOL on Tuesday last."

There was dead silence and then someone—Tubby—began to laugh, jarring the shocked silence.

"Lieutenant Lovesby," Bat said automatically.

Colonel Reynard had been watching them all with his grave, rather sad blue eyes. His gaze fastened on Tubby.

"Sorry," Tubby muttered. "It's the thought of old Orton crashing in on the hens. They'll be off their egg-laying for the duration."

There was an uneasy ripple of laughter—Orton had not been well-known—and those who knew him did not particularly like him, but the fellow was dead after all. Perhaps murdered. No one had missed the implication of a naked corpse dropping from the sky.

"Quite," Major Chase said. "No flight was logged for Monday night; however several people heard an aeroplane take off and land perhaps forty-five minutes later."

The door behind them opened, and Cowboy walked in.

"Did anyone s-see this plane?" Bat asked at the same instant. To his chagrin, his stammer was back. Years without a fucking problem and now he was chewing up words.

Major Chase eyed him—as did the Frenchman.

"Not that we have been able to discover so far," Major Chase said. "The colonel is asking whether anyone remembers anything that might prove helpful in his investigation."

"*His* investigation?" Bat said. "Sir, isn't this a matter for the military police?"

"Colonel Reynard began investigating this as a civilian death, but he's made remarkable progress in two days. And as we are guests in this country, Wing has directed that we work in conjunction with the civilian constabulary."

Bat felt the weight of another's gaze. He looked up and Cowboy stood by the piano watching him. And he could practically hear Cowboy telling him to shut it.

And perhaps Cowboy was right. The Red Caps would not take kindly to civilian

interference. They would probably work against this old French fox with the shrewd blue eyes.

“This mechanic, Orton,” the colonel said suddenly. “He was well-liked?”

No one said anything.

“His sergeant can give you a better idea of the company he kept,” Major Chase said.

“He was a lousy mechanic,” Cowboy remarked.

“You did not care for him ... *monsieur*?”

“Like I said, he was a lousy mechanic. Good mechanics can mean the difference between life and death to pilots.”

Bat felt the floor dip beneath him as it did when one had flown too many hours in a high wind. What was Cowboy doing? He’d warned Bat off only to bring attention to himself. Attention neither of them could afford. It was obvious that Colonel Reynard had already drawn the obvious conclusion that Orton had been dumped by a pilot in the squadron he serviced.

Bat questioned, “Was he dead?”

“What is that you say?” asked the colonel.

“Did the fall kill him?” Bat asked. “Or was he already dead?”

“Ah. A very good question, Captain...?”

“Bryant,” Major Chase supplied. “A Flight’s squadron leader.”

“He reads detective stories,” Ambrose offered jovially. “Sherlock Holmes. Nick Carter.”

The colonel said measuredly, “It is possible that Orton was killed in the fall. His back was broken when he crashed through the henhouse roof. However, he sustained a blow to the head which might also have killed him.”

“I don’t suppose it could have been an accident?” Tubby suggested. “A couple of mechanics out joyriding?”

Colonel Reynard said smoothly, “This we will attempt to ascertain from the Sergeant of Mechanics. In the meantime, would it be possible for you gentlemen to account for your whereabouts on the evening in question?”

“I say,” Varlik spoke up. “Surely no one *here* is under suspicion?”

The colonel made one of those broad Gallic gestures.

“We expect your full cooperation, gentlemen,” Major Chase remarked. “The sooner we get this matter cleared up, the better for all of us.”

There was an awkward silence.

“Your whereabouts, messieurs?” Colonel Reynard probed.

“We were all here,” Tubby said, looking around for confirmation.

“B Flight was on maneuvers. We were all here,” Rowbothom clarified. There were nods, murmurs of assent, agreement between them all. Even the monkey seemed in concord. Was it going to be that simple?

“Not Bat,” Heath said.

“Certainly he was,” Tubby said instantly. “Chatted with him for hours.”

“He didn’t come in until late. Nearly midnight, it was.”

“Well then? He couldn’t be in two places at once, could he?”

The French colonel turned to Bat. A battery of eyes seemed to swing his way.

“If you want the truth, I don’t remember,” Bat admitted. “I’m usually here but...”

“It was right after Owl went down,” Ambrose said. “The next night, wasn’t it?”

There was an uncomfortable pause. The colonel looked his inquiry. Bat said calmly, "Lieutenant Roberts and I were close friends. His plane went down Sunday in the Hesdin woods."

"Ah," the colonel replied.

"I never saw Cowboy that evening," Elliot put in.

"That's because you spent the evening sawing wood in front of the fire," Cowboy retorted laconically, and there were chuckles. "You can bet I wasn't flying loop de loops and dropping passengers on farm animals."

More laughter, but Reynard queried, "You are not well, monsieur?"

"I?" Bat said coolly. "I'm perfectly well."

The colonel nodded thoughtfully, still inspecting Bat. "This Monsieur Orton, he gets along all right with everyone?" he asked again.

Everyone nodded and shrugged it off. Orton was all right, that was the consensus.

"Not much of a mechanic, really," Ambrose opined, and there was agreement.

"But one does not kill a man for that," Colonel Reynard said genially.

"Depends on just how bad a mechanic he was," Cowboy said.

The colonel smiled, looking, in Bat's opinion, more like a fox than ever. "*Oui, Monsieur...?*"

"Cooper," Major Chase supplied.

"Monsieur Cooper, it is apparent to all that you were no admirer of this man, Orton."

Cowboy smiled genially.

There was further discussion of putting together a timetable of the squadron's movements. Bat missed much of it as he was running over all the things he wanted to say to Cowboy—none of them flattering. He surfaced when Major Chase said, "I suppose you'll want to go through Orton's things?"

"*Mais oui, certainment.*"

It took every ounce of Bat's self-control not to look at Cowboy.

The door to the mess opened. Sergeant Smythe looked in. "Wing's just telephoned. The clouds 'ave lifted, sir. Four enemy planes 'eaded our way!"

"A Flight," Major Chase said to Bat.

"On it, sir," Bat said, and indeed they were already scrambling for their flight jackets and racing out the door, boots pounding on the wet earth as they ran for the airfield.

Bat found himself loping alongside Cowboy ahead of the others. He glanced at the hawkish, hard profile and said, "Was there anything on Orton to connect him to me?"

Cowboy shook his head, once, curtly.

"He must have had some sort of proof, though. They'll find it—"

Cowboy stopped, grabbing Bat's arm and halting him as well. They were oblivious to the men running past them, shooting curious looks their way. "What proof do you think he had?"

"No idea. I can't imagine what it would be."

"I think Orton was bluffing. I think he was trying to rattle you while you were off balance. Why else would he have waited till Owl was dead?"

Bat shook his head. "Why in God's name did you drop him onto a henhouse?"

"I was aiming for the pond!"

Glancing back toward the château, Bat saw Major Chase and Colonel Reynard coming out the door. He freed himself from Cowboy's grip.

“Don’t lose your head,” Cowboy growled. He turned and sprinted toward his plane. Bat headed for his DH-2. A thought struck him and he cut across to Pickering and Burns who were trying to convince Sergeant Lamb that they were supposed to be going up with A Flight.

“Burns, you’re up,” Bat called.

“What about me, sir?”

“Next time, Pickering.”

“*Sir!*”

Bat ignored the wail of protest. To Burns, he said, “Listen, son. Stick close to me. Remember, don’t fly in a straight line. Make yourself a difficult target. And short bursts of machine gun fire are best. Don’t spend everything you have in the first minutes.”

Burns nodded eagerly, eyes bright. Bat squeezed his shoulder fleetingly before racing back to his own plane. He swung himself up into the cockpit, fixed his goggles as the mechanic swung the propellers.

The mechanic—a replacement for Orton—yelled, “Switch off!”

Bat echoed him, cutting the switch. He grabbed for his fur-lined gloves, shoved his fingers into their soft warmth.

The mechanic shouted, “Contact!”

“Contact!” Bat snapped the switch back on and heard the tigerbelly rumble of the Monosoupape engine.

The plane trembled all over with an illusion of anticipation, and then they were jogging, bouncing down the rough dirt runway, propellers moving in a shimmering blur until the spinning wheels left the ground and Bat was airborne again climbing toward the black-lined clouds.

It was cold, but the rainswept wind felt good on his face, cleansing. He looked to the right and Cowboy was there, his profile grim. To Bat’s left, Ambrose was fiddling with his Lewis machine gun.

The pack was on the hunt once more.

* * * *

Bat didn’t start out hating the Germans. He’d been at school with a couple of German boys, and he’d been dismayed at the idea he might one day come face-to-face with Karl or Gerrit at the front.

Even after Algie had been killed, Bat tried to look at the situation impersonally. It was war, after all. That had been Algie’s attitude, and Bat tried to adopt it as his own. It had grown more and more difficult as time went by, and more and more of his friends died. But was that the fault of the German pilots he came up against? Or was it the fault of the corrupt old men who determined such things?

The solution Bat came up with was to avoid getting too close to anyone. Of course that was impossible when it came to old chums like Ambrose and Tubby—and Gene—well, that had been something entirely different. The queer thing was he couldn’t remember the first time he’d seen Gene. They’d transferred in around the same time, perhaps that was it, but Gene had simply always seemed to be there.

No, he couldn’t help feeling the way he had about Gene.

But long before Gene’s death, Bat had faced up to the fact that one couldn’t cherish one’s comrades too dearly without imperiling one’s own effectiveness and the job at

hand.

Varlik's death hit him hard, though—mostly because he felt it was partly his fault. If Heath had been in position instead of hanging back from the fight, Varlik quite likely would have made it. Made it through that skirmish at least. But Heath had circled and dillydallied out the edge of the fray until he'd caught the attention of one of the Boche pilots, and then he'd turned tail and ran for home.

Varlik had gone down—in flames—less than two minutes later.

Back at the aerodrome, the other pilots were no longer speaking to Heath—which in Tubby's case, was a good thing. And Bat didn't trust himself to haul Heath on the carpet until he'd reported to Chase and had a drink. Or two.

Cowboy joined him as he was down to the suds, and watching that lean, hard body move onto the stool next to him, watching the movement of muscle and long, strong limbs beneath the khaki tunic, Bat felt a jolt of lust that appalled him.

Gene had been right. This was the lowest kind of animal passion, and having given into it once, Bat now craved that physical release unceasingly. It unnerved him, the way he looked for Cowboy—on the ground and in the air. He wanted Cowboy despite the risk, and he knew from the steady look Cowboy gave him—his eyes dark blue like the approaching night—that Cowboy wanted him too.

And this was madness. *Madness*. Because even if there had been no risk at all, he couldn't afford to need anyone again. Not for anything—except, perhaps, support in the air. This was all any of them could afford to give.

"Why don't we get out of here?" Cowboy asked under his breath.

"Can't."

Cowboy raised an eyebrow. "Can't? Or won't?"

"Same thing," Bat replied, still curt.

"Not exactly," Cowboy replied. "But I won't insist." He added gently, "This time."

Bat's gaze met Cowboy's. "*Insist?*"

"Yep."

"Planning a spot of blackmail yourself, are you?"

Cowboy grinned, unperturbed. "Not a very friendly way to put it. You weren't exactly fighting for your honor yesterday."

True, but hardly tactful. Bat managed a chilly smile and an indifferent lift of his shoulder.

"Throw a dog a bone," he said.

Cowboy's expression tightened, then he laughed. He said softly, "You're just kidding yourself. You'll be begging me for it before long."

After delivering a long withering stare, Bat rose unhurriedly from the bar. "Pardon me," he said.

Cowboy drawled, "That's right. Git along little doggie. We'll chat later."

Bat froze and then laughed derisively. He crossed to Heath who stood by himself at the end of the bar.

Someone had turned on the gramophone. "Roses of Picardy" was playing, and it seemed to Bat that Heath lost color as the first notes began.

He turned as Bat reached him, saying fiercely in an under voice, "Do they think I don't know? They blame me!"

Bat fastened a hand on Heath's shoulder, guiding him toward the door. "Step into my

office, old boy.”

Heath resisted for a moment, then allowed himself to be towed outside.

They walked around the side of the house to the garden that was mostly sticks and dead leaves and brambles at this time of year. Perhaps at any time during a year of war. It was nearly dusk, and the good smells that issued from the mess kitchen were at odds with the dark, musty smells of the herbs growing between cracked paving stones.

Bat lit a cigarette for himself and one for Heath who ranted for several minutes about the injustice of it all. Bat said nothing until even Heath seemed to have tired of the sound of his voice.

Into the sudden silence, Bat expelled a long stream of smoke. Heath was watching him warily. Bat said calmly, “Look here, there’s no use beating around the bush. I’m not saying Varlik’s death is on your head, but you’re finking it. And you have been for some time now.”

Heath stood stone still. His eyes looked black in his white face. “Are you saying you think I’ve lost my nerve?”

Bat drew a lungful of smoke. “Have you?”

“No, I bloody well haven’t! I just haven’t been lucky in my hunting that’s all. I’m out there same as everyone else, risking life and limb.”

Bat was silent.

“Oh, I know what this is about,” Heath said bitterly. “Not part of the club, am I? I don’t have some fancy fucking public school education. My father isn’t a viscount or an earl.”

“Don’t be an ass,” Bat said wearily.

“I don’t see you giving Ambrose a pep talk every time he fails to bag his Fritz. Or Tubby. I’d like to see you drag bloody Tubby on the carpet like this. I don’t see you trying to make an example of fucking Tubby!”

Exasperated, Bat bit out, “I don’t see Tubby or Ambrose hanging back from a scrap, watching a comrade—” He broke off as Heath flung away from him. “Right,” he said more calmly, “If it helps ... I know what you must feel. The first time I was shot down—”

He’d told the story a number of times. Told it for laughs in the mess, although in fact he’d had nightmares for weeks about it. Enemy fire had hit his fuel line. He’d run out of petrol on his way back to base, tried to make it back across the lines, and hadn’t managed. He’d tried to bring the plane down in one piece and hadn’t quite managed that either. He’d broken his leg and dislocated his shoulder. When he’d been lifted out of the wreckage he’d told the German soldiers they spoke excellent French—which, since these Germans had actually been French soldiers, amused them all heartily.

“You’ve no idea what I feel! None of you have.” Heath glared at Bat, his eyes bright with tears. “It’s just a game to you! And if you die, fuckin’ *Per ardua ad astra!*”

“It’s not true, Heath.” Bat reached out, but Heath shook him off and strode off down the uneven pathway.

With a dismal sense of failure, Bat watched him go.

“Maybe you ought to work on that bedside manner of yours, Aubrey,” Cowboy said lazily from behind him.

Bat managed not to start. He flicked his cigarette away and turned unhurriedly. “What do you want?”

“You,” Cowboy said. “Now.”

Bat’s heart began to race meeting that shadowy, hungry look. He shook his head.

“Aren’t *you* forgetting something?” Cowboy inquired. “You’re not in any position to tell me no.”

So he hadn’t imagined the tacit threat in Cowboy’s words. Bat swallowed, said thickly, “Aren’t *you* forgetting something? You can’t go to Chase or the Red Caps without implicating yourself in a murder.”

Cowboy’s grin widened, very white in his bronze face. “Well, I wasn’t planning to tell *everything*. I wouldn’t have to. See, I wasn’t totally honest about not finding anything on Orton’s body to connect you to him.”

Bat opened his mouth but found his brain empty of words.

Cowboy continued cheerfully, “So all I’ve got to do is make sure that little piece of evidence finds its way into the right hands...”

The paving stones seemed to shift beneath Bat’s feet. He reached out to steady himself on the marble foot of a statue of Diana.

“No need to look like that,” Cowboy told him kindly. “I’m not going to hand you over to that old Frenchie—or the Red Caps. I like you, Aubrey. I’m not going to hurt you, but I am going to have you whenever I want you.”

Bat was shaking his head.

“Sure, I am,” Cowboy said. “No use pretending you don’t want it too. I can feel the heat coming off of you every time you look at me. You want it just as bad as I do, and this way you don’t have to feel bad about Owl or your lordly ancestors or that little gal who faithfully mails you *The London Times* every week.”

Edie. Funny thing that Cowboy should mention her in this context. The one time Bat had tried with Edie ... well, it hadn’t gone terribly well. Edie had been lovely about it, but, embarrassing as it was to admit, she flustered him. Whereas Cowboy—

A strange shivering heat crackled through Bat’s nerves as he met Cowboy’s gaze. He was hot and cold, hungry and sick all at the same time. *He had no choice*. He was going to have to submit to Cowboy—whenever Cowboy wished. The thought appalled him, and it filled him with frantic excitement. His erection was already swollen and rubbing painfully against the binding cloth of his trousers.

“What proof do you have?” he managed in a voice that did not sound like his own. “What did you find on Orton’s body?”

“Maybe I’ll tell you one of these days,” Cowboy said, “but right now I don’t want to waste any more time talking. We get little enough time as it is. Let’s go someplace we can be private.” He turned and walked the other way through the garden, not bothering to ascertain whether Bat followed or not.

After a wavering, undecided moment, Bat started after him—uncomfortable and unspeaking—until they came to the huge old aviary now overgrown with vines and shrubbery both inside and out of the cage.

The metal gate clanged dully shut behind them, and Cowboy turned to draw Bat into the shelter of a thicket of cypress.

“You know what to do,” Cowboy told him as he stood there, staring.

It was actually a great relief to drop his trousers and free his constricted cock. Unmoving, barely breathing, Bat waited while Cowboy unfastened his own uniform and then turned his attention to Bat’s tunic, taking his time, kissing the side of Bat’s throat,

the curve of his bared shoulder...

The head of Cowboy's thick rigid cock brushed Bat's naked belly.

"Just do what you're going to do," Bat ordered through dry lips. "Don't turn it into a performance. How do you want me?"

Cowboy lifted his head and smiled faintly, wryly. He put his arms around Bat and kissed him again, and his mouth was tender and soft, coaxing Bat's lips apart.

Unwillingly, Bat began to respond. He liked it. He couldn't help it.

Cowboy's mouth was warm, the taste rich and mellow as sun-split fruit or golden ale. His eyes glittered, and Bat responded to that fever-bright sheen with a rush of aggressive hunger, his hands hard and demanding as he grabbed Cowboy back—grinding his mouth against Cowboy's, making an assault of hot mouths and grasping fingers.

Everywhere Cowboy touched, Bat's taut body seemed to leap into clamoring life.

It was not the gentle coupling of before, and Bat was dimly aware that his anger was driving them both. They wrestled for control, locked together and grappling. Their tunics were undone, trousers around their ankles and then they were lying in the soft moss. Cowboy's muscular legs fastened viselike around Bat's narrow hips, they bucked and heaved, arching hard against each other, pushing away even as they struggled to be one. This time Bat refused to give Cowboy entrance, and Cowboy's stiff cock seemed to joust with his own, scraping and stabbing.

It ended with jarring suddenness, Bat's body erupting in incandescent release that tore through him, leaving him shaking and stunned. From the crown of his head to the tips of his toes ... every atom of his body seemed to spark and snap in the wake of that firestorm.

Cowboy came a few seconds later—with a funny little sob. He continued to clutch Bat tight as little ripples moved through his powerful body.

At last he opened his eyes and studied Bat's closed expression.

"Did I hurt you?"

Bat curled his lip. "Do you think you could?"

"Sure," Cowboy said. "But that's not what I want." He levered himself up, getting to his feet in one lithe move, reaching a hand down.

Bat ignored it, rising and dragging up his trousers. He brushed himself off finding with distaste his belly sticky. This had been more on the lines of assault than genuine invasion, and he felt almost ... disappointed to be getting off so easily.

He could not understand himself. Even less could he understand Cowboy who reached out to brush his mouth with an almost hesitant touch. "You look like the kid Santa Claus forgot. Wasn't it all right?"

Bat jerked his head away, turning to button up his tunic. "What proof against me did Orton have?" he asked shortly.

There was a pause. Cowboy said, "We better get back before someone notices we're gone."

"Does it matter?"

"We're spending a lot of time together. These boys pay attention to everything you do."

"A little late to think of that, isn't it?"

Cowboy said nothing.

Bat finished buttoning his tunic. He stared at Cowboy in the failing light. "You're

not going to tell me, are you?"

Cowboy said slowly, "How about this? How about I tell you what you want to hear after you tell me what I want to hear?"

"What is it you want to hear?" Bat snapped.

Another pause.

"I'll let you know when I hear it." And Cowboy grinned that wide, white grin.

Chapter Four

Bat had hoped to spend a little time training Burns and Pickering in something beyond map reading and flight theory, but Heath was shot down the following morning, and Burns had to replace him. Burns was shot down that afternoon, and Pickering was assigned his place in A Flight.

"Awful run of luck we're having lately," Tubby said when he and Bat stood outside smoking that evening.

"Yes."

"At least Heath went out like a man in the end."

Bat drew on his cigarette and released a long stream of smoke into the chill night. The scent of rain was in the air again. He hoped it would rain. He hoped it would come down in sheets and ground them for a day or two. It would be a rare delight to look forward to a day without funerals.

Into his silence, Tubby said, "Hope you're not brooding over Heath, old man. You know as well as I do he was responsible for Varlik's buying it."

"Christ, Tubby. The bloody Boche are responsible for Varlik." Irritably, Bat flicked his cigarette away.

"Heath—oh well. True enough. No point speaking ill of the dead." Tubby puffed thoughtfully. "Heard from Edie lately?"

Bat felt another flare of annoyance. What was the matter with him? Nerves apparently shot to pieces. "Yes," he said. "I get a letter every week. She's joined the Women's Defence Relief Corps."

Tubby laughed curtly. "Has she. Little Edie."

Bat glanced at his profile. "Why?"

Tubby shrugged. "No reason." Still not looking at Bat, he said neutrally, "You seem to have changed your mind about Cowboy."

"What d'you mean?" Bat inquired, equally colorless.

"You had no use for him at first, but you seem fairly tight now."

Bat closed his eyes, glad of the concealing darkness. *Tight*. Yes, that was one word for it. He thought of that morning. He'd deliberately stayed at Madame Fournier's the night before, but Cowboy had been waiting for him in the tunnel of trees when Bat started for the airfield just before dawn.

Cowboy had gestured for Bat to go to the gazebo, and silently, Bat had obeyed. He had intended to stay unmoved and unresponsive—they were taking fearful risks. Gene would have been appalled. Bat was appalled—but apparently helpless to resist. And though he wanted to pretend otherwise, his appetite was as fierce as Cowboy's.

So he had let himself be ordered to the gazebo, knowing full well what would happen but telling himself he would be an unwilling partner to it. They'd had to move swiftly, changing out of their flying clothes. Bat had not struggled when Cowboy turned him to face the wall, following the silent directions to spread his legs. But despite his determination to remain stoic, when that slick oily finger pierced him, his breath caught harshly, and he began to pant as Cowboy stroked and teased him in that strange seductive way.

It felt like nothing on earth. An outrageous intimacy, and yet unbearably sweet to have Cowboy touching him so. He began to cry out softly. Cowboy whispered hotly against his ear, “Tell me what you want, Aubrey.”

He had shaken his head, but what was the use with excitement and pain spiraling beyond his control. “Please...” he’d ground out. “Please.”

Cowboy murmured, “*Please?* You sound like you’re begging me. Are you begging me to fuck you?”

There was a friendly mockery in his voice, and his fingers were moving with delicate expertise, pressing and pushing inside Bat’s arse.

Bat had nodded, then said hoarsely, “I do want it. I want you to fuck me again.”

“I thought you would,” Cowboy said dryly.

And he withdrew his fingers and pushed his cock inside Bat’s body. It was so much more intense than the fingers—more satisfying too, that warm weight shoving into him inch by inch, forcing him to accept, submit—it was a relief to be taken over like that.

“This what you want?” Cowboy asked.

Face to the wall, the rough wood against his face, Bat had nodded frantically. Yes. Please. Yes. This was what he wanted. To be fucked, to be taken, to be mastered—just for these few minutes before he had to be in charge again of so many men, so many lives. He was trembling as Cowboy slid the rest of the way into him, slow but steady until they were standing balls to arse, and Bat heard his own whimpers.

“Shhh,” Cowboy soothed. “I’ll give you what you want.” He’d kissed Bat’s hair and he kissed him behind his ear, and then he had fucked him briskly, hard and businesslike while Bat mewled those helpless shaming noises. Cowboy thrust into him deeply, held Bat as he writhed and twisted in sweet abandon until he had come in shuddering waves of release. Then quiet and obedient, Bat had stood trembling while Cowboy continued to thrust into him again and again, feeling it intensely as Cowboy pressed home, and then Cowboy had come too.

It was over and they were dressing quickly, not speaking, not looking at each other. They left the gazebo, cut across the field past the incurious gaze of a brown and white cow.

They had walked in silence to the airfield, climbed in their planes as the sun came up red and molten as Mars.

And a few hours later Heath was dead—and then Burns.

What did it matter really? Both he and Cowboy could also be dead the next day—within a few hours really. Any of them might be. No wonder if they all felt that terrible compulsion to grab every moment of life, to make some brief human connection, feel something even for a few minutes.

Eat, drink, and be merry for tomorrow we die. It was even in the Bible, wasn’t it?

Bat having failed to answer, Tubby examined the tip of his own cigarette. “Any word on what that French colonel turned up on Orton?”

Bat stared at him then. “No.”

Tubby put his cigarette to his lips, pulled on it thoughtfully, and said, “Orton was no loss. Whoever dropped him out of that plane must have had good reason. Ruddy useless as a mechanic.”

Bat made a noncommittal sound.

* * * *

Bat slept in the château that night. He fully expected Cowboy to come to him—and braced himself to repel all boarders—and Cowboy did come, but he sat on the foot of Bat's bed and shared the contents of a package from home, apparently content to smoke and chat and divvy up small, silver-wrapped chocolates.

The red tip of Cowboy's cigarette wagged in the darkness as he said, "Henderson says the prevailing theory is some French pilot might have killed Orton."

"Henderson?" Bat asked around the bite of milk chocolate.

"One of the mechanics assigned to my bus." Cowboy studied Bat through the veil of cigarette smoke. "Turns out Orton was something of a ladies' man."

"You're joking."

Cowboy shook his head. "Nope. Furthermore, it seems old Sidney was no respecter of the sacred vows of marriage."

Bat unpeeled another chocolate thoughtfully. "But this is the opinion of the ground crew. No reason to believe that old gendarme fox subscribes to that theory."

"No," Cowboy agreed.

Neither spoke for a time. Then Bat asked reluctantly, "Why *did* you help me that night?"

But at the same time Cowboy said, "So what do you plan on doing after the war?"

"After the war?" Bat stared as though Cowboy had gone mad.

"Sure. You still planning on going into the Foreign Office like your daddy wants?"

"Oh, you bloody ... *Yank*," Bat retorted, and Cowboy gestured for him to lower his voice.

"What are you on about now?" he asked.

"You blighters come along and you're so sure of yourselves. So arrogant and all-knowing. It's only a big game to you. A great bloody adventure. *After the war!* I suppose it's no wonder—not even your fight, is it?"

"It will be," Cowboy said. "Eventually. Better fight 'em here than in England or at home."

Bat made a sound of disgust which seemed to amuse Cowboy all the more. The moonlight softened his face, made him look younger—as young as Burns or Pickering. "Now don't go gettin' riled, Aubrey. I'm just making pleasant conversation with you."

"Don't," Bat said.

Cowboy snickered, unperturbed, and tossed Bat another chocolate. Watching Bat irritably undo the silver foil, he remarked, "Some people are going to live through this war. Someone always does. I plan on being one of them."

"You will be," Bat said, and managed to make it sound like something Cowboy would do out of spite.

Cowboy said evenly, "And so will you."

Bat laughed without humor. "I shall be more than happy if I manage to get away with murder."

"Shut that kind of talk. It was an accident, and we both know it."

"But you're still threatening to go to the Red Caps if I won't let you—" Bat swallowed on the words as the mental image of what he had already permitted—what he longed to do with Cowboy again—came into his mind. And if he was honest, the dreadful part was not that he had no say in the matter; it was that he didn't *want* a say.

Watching the emotions flicker across the other pilot's features, Cowboy said calmly,

“That’s right. I like what we do together. And so do you, although I know you don’t think you should. Maybe because you’re still in love with Owl’s memory. Or maybe because you just don’t have a lot of imagination.”

Bat gaped at him, and Cowboy leaned over and kissed his mouth. He tasted like chocolate and the cigarettes he had been smoking. He tasted warm and alive and sweet. Before Bat could respond, Cowboy drew back.

“You like those?” He glanced at the chocolate Bat held in nerveless fingers.

Bat nodded.

“They call ’em kisses,” Cowboy said.

Bat found his voice at last. “They look like tears to me.”

* * * *

First crawl passed without incident.

In the middle of the afternoon A Flight was assigned the task of bringing down an enemy balloon near Sailly-sur-la-Lys. The observation balloons made the miserable conditions of ground warfare even more unpleasant for the PBI, for here too the Germans were better equipped and better trained.

The terrain itself was already difficult thanks to the scenic hills, forests, and rivers of northern France. The bland German eye in the sky was the final straw.

Unfortunately Varlik had been 44’s most successful balloon strafers. He had developed his own method of making one straight dash through the circle of Archie and firing a single long burst of incendiary bullets into the balloon. Varlik had scorned the prevailing tactic of repeat sorties through the black barrage of anti-aircraft guns as nothing more than a showy means of suicide.

But now Varlik was dead, and it fell to Bat to decide who should be the balloon killer’s successor. As he mulled over his fliers, it occurred to him that if he really feared exposure by Cowboy, the means of putting a halt to it was at hand.

He rejected the idea instantly, but still the notion persisted. If Cowboy was a threat to him, Bat could eliminate the threat by simply sending Cowboy out on difficult mission after mission until one of them finished him.

Horrified, he sat with the map before him unseeing of the grids and lines ... picturing instead Cowboy’s death. Picturing an end to that arrogance and domineering—an end to manipulation and coercion. He could have his life back. For whatever time was left to him.

Not only would it mean the end of this degrading physical blackmail, it would be the end of his own ignoble desires.

He sat unmoving at the spindly desk in the blue room. Easiest thing in the world. But his heart was beating like a wild bird trapped in a cage.

An end to that lazy tiger’s grin; an end to those midnight blue eyes that saw far too much; an end to the powerful body that overwhelmed and ravished his own. His arse was still sore from the most recent pounding he’d taken. And perhaps he did lack imagination, but all he had to do was close his eyes and he could smell again the scent of sex and leather and bare skin, feel the burn and scrape in his violated channel, hear Cowboy’s harsh breaths against his ear—and his own voice crying out for more.

Quickly, he folded up the map and rose. When he went out to give the day’s orders he assigned Ambrose the honor of puncturing the balloon, and tagged Elliot to be his

picador.

* * * *

Bat had his pilots set their watches to match his own, issuing orders to cross the lines precisely at 14:15 and fly intercept between Ambrose and Elliot and any hostile aircraft. He took every man of A Flight with him, fully expecting to find Hun planes guarding the airborne enemy observation post, and in this he was not disappointed.

As the patrol continued in formation on the safe side of Allied lines Ambrose and Elliot left the pack and positioned themselves a good distance the other side of Sailly-sur-la-Lys. So far they had spotted not a single pair of German wings, but Bat was wagering the Jasta would be making an appearance as soon as A Flight approached the gasbag.

As his watch neared the hour Bat prowled closer to the point of attack. Scanning the fields of blue ahead he spotted two DH-2s four or five miles ahead streaking toward the dun-colored balloon.

“Oh, *Christ*.” Bat checked his watch. 14:10. In their eagerness to bag the balloon, Ambrose and Elliot had disobeyed orders and had gone in several minutes ahead of the stated time. Bat looked around. The rest of A Flight was coming into formation right on schedule, but now instead of offering cover to their balloon killers, they were left in the position of running to catch up.

Bat signaled smartly and the machines of A Flight opened up in pursuit of the two pilots. In the pale distance Bat spotted a formation of six Albatros moving to cut off the de Havillands’ approach.

One lone Spad seemed to burst from the clouds, swooping in to engage the Albatros fighters. Cowboy.

That was the last clear thought Bat had for some time as two things happened at once. The balloon burst into flames indicating that either Ambrose or Elliot had succeeded in reaching the target despite the best diversionary attempts of the Albatros fighters. At the same instant the towering clouds behind Bat seemed to spew out a stream of Fokkers and Halberstadt Ds which swarmed down on A Flight’s Spads and DH-2s.

Bat, who had started to Cowboy’s aid, found he was distanced from the rest of A Flight with two Fokkers on his tail. Flaming bullets wove a deadly web around his aeroplane as he zigged and zagged. Meanwhile the ground crew was sending up “archers” and “onions” and they blazed through the knots of planes like fireballs. But the Fokkers would not be shaken, and Bat took more drastic evasive action by means of the Immelmann Turn, a sharp rudder turn off a vertical zoom—followed by a steep dive.

As he completed his half loop he was on the tail of one of the Fokkers, but the other had executed a half loop himself, and was still on Bat’s tail. He could feel the impact as machine gun bullets tore into his craft, and figuring that he was lost, he determined to take the pilot in front of him down with him. He kept the DH-2’s nose pointed at the tail of the Albatros which was now diving steeply downward in an attempt to escape, and his thumb firmly on the trigger. As the distance closed to fifty yards, Bat saw his bullets pierce the back of the pilot’s seat.

The enemy plane fluttered and then began to fall, and Bat pulled his stick back nearly to his seat and began a sharp ascent in the hope of shaking the second fighter off.

As he climbed he recognized one of his own patrol on the tail of the Fokker—Pickering—emptying his drum into the Hun. A waste of ammunition, but Bat was

grateful for it as the second Fokker grew preoccupied with his own fight for survival. Bat shot up and away. With a little time to breathe, he began to scout for Cowboy.

Had Cowboy made it—outnumbered as he had been? It had been a gallant effort distracting the Albatros fighters from Ambrose and Elliot—and fucking unnecessary if everyone had only followed orders.

Bat couldn't see the American pilot anywhere; the air was humming with bullets and tracers as black crosses and gold cockades, blue and brown planes wove in and out, darting forward and back in the ferocious flurries of a dogfight.

Many twisting, turning combats were in progress as Bat once more gained the sunny blue fields above Saily-sur-la-Lys. Several machines had fallen but whether friend or foe was impossible to tell at that great height. The Spads and de Havillands were scattered far across the sky; A Flight's formation was destroyed. There was nothing for it. Bat determined to call them together and head back across the lines. The balloon was in flames, the mission was successfully completed, and to continue fighting across enemy lines was foolhardy.

The Boche seemed only too happy to see them go. Bat collected his pilots and made for home, and the enemy planes lost no time in putting further distance between them. Bat dropped back a bit noting that the last of his flock were well on their way. Out of the corner of his eye, he spotted action over the Somme, and detoured to investigate.

He found Cowboy engaged in attack on a German Albatros. It became rapidly clear that his gun had jammed because he was firing at the German pilot with his pistol. Bat began to laugh, giddy with relief he had no intention of examining. However, his amusement was short-lived. The German pilot, having belatedly figured out that his attacker was in a vulnerable position, swung about to turn the tables on the gadfly American.

Cowboy was reloading his revolver, cool as could be, when he spotted Bat. He gave that nod, that aggravating cool little nod, and Bat signaled him out of the fray in no uncertain terms. Cowboy turned on wingtip and moved out of harm's way, and Bat came diving down at full speed, guns blazing.

With his first burst of machine gun fire he saw the petrol tank of the enemy machine rupture into fire. Bat pulled up as the other plane began to spin like a Roman candle.

The enemy plane descended rapidly, the wind fanning the flames into a fiery furnace. Bat hoped the pilot was dead for he would have been burned to a crisp long before he hit the ground. He watched till the final impact. There was a great explosion and all that remained of the aeroplane was a black cloud of smoke and dust that ascended a few yards and was scattered across the bones of the battlefield.

Bat turned for home once more, Cowboy falling into position beside him.

* * * *

"That was close," Cowboy said once they were on solid ground once more. He poked a finger through the bullet hole in the leather sleeve of Bat's flight jacket. "You sure you're not hit?"

"Fritz can't shoot to save his life," Bat said, although his arm stung where the bullet had grazed him. In fact, it was little short of a miracle he was standing there, but then it was a miracle either of them was standing there. Thinking about how close you'd come only gave you a case of the screaming wobbles. Much better to keep one's thoughts

focused on the here and now.

He said, "Speaking of not able to hit the broad side of a barn, I thought all you cowboys were supposed to be expert marksmen?"

"You've been reading Max Brand again. The wind velocity threw me off."

"Wind?" Bat scoffed. "You call that little zephyr dancing up there a wind?"

Something flickered in Cowboy's eyes, and he whispered huskily, "When can you get away? I want you, Aubrey."

That was all, but Bat had to fight the wave of heat rising inside him threatening to melt bones—and brain. He said stiffly—stiff being the operative word, "I have to make my report."

"I'll see you afterwards. The gazebo."

"I..." Bat swallowed. He had to get control of this thing. "I don't know that I can."

The lines of Cowboy's face were taut with hunger—and something else. He said flatly, "You can and you will. I'll see you down there." And he turned and walked away.

This was ... this had to stop. This was madness. Utter, absolute madness.

Heading for Major Chase's office, Bat pulled off the white silk scarf that protected his neck from chafing against the leather collar of his flight jacket.

He rapped briskly on the closed door. The murmur of voices beyond stopped.

"Come," called Chase, and Bat stepped inside.

He hesitated before closing the door. The old gendarme, Colonel Reynard, was sitting in the chair before Chase's desk. The office smelled pleasantly of pipe smoke. A bottle of scotch sat on the desk between the two officers.

"Captain Bryant," Major Chase greeted him. "Well done! Wing has been on the line. Your mission appears to have been a success."

"Sir," Bat said automatically. His attention was on Colonel Reynard. He did not like the light of recognition in the old officer's blue gaze. But then everything about Colonel Reynard made him uneasy.

He made his report succinctly. Major Chase nodded, approvingly. Colonel Reynard sat sipping his scotch and listening, apparently cleared for this kind of debriefing.

Bat finished his chronicle and waited for dismissal.

Major Chase looked at Colonel Reynard and Colonel Reynard nodded infinitesimally.

Something was up all right.

Major Chase said, "As you know, Bryant, Colonel Reynard has been looking into the death of mechanic Sidney Orton. Orton was assigned to your crate, wasn't he?"

"Yes, sir," Bat said.

"How did you get on with him?"

"Sir?"

"What was your private opinion of the man?"

Bat thought over his response. He said, "Never noticed him much. That is..."

Colonel Reynard leaned forward slightly. "*Oui?*"

Bat said without expression, "I'm afraid he wasn't an awfully good mechanic."

Chase snorted. Colonel Reynard leaned back in his chair.

There was another look between Chase and the Frenchman. Colonel Reynard said, "You had not personal dealings with this man, Orton?"

"I?" Bat said in the tone perfected through generations of applying the foot firmly to

the neck of the dear old proletariat. He hoped the mildly affronted tone helped disguise the fact that his heart was hammering with fright.

The colonel said in his nearly flawless English, "*Eh bien*. Can you explain, Captain Bryant, why this man Orton should have had in his personal belongings a letter from you to the late Lieutenant Gene Roberts?"

Chapter Five

That sick, jarred feeling: it was much the same sensation as when one made a particularly rotten landing.

“I’ve no idea, sir,” Bat answered, and he must have sounded suitably bewildered.

The colonel opened an attaché case, took out an envelope, and unfolded the letter inside which he proffered to Bat. After a hesitation, Bat took it.

It was a letter he had written to Gene from England the previous summer. After he’d been shot down over Verdun, he’d been invalided home to Kent to recover. It had seemed to take a bloody long time, and he’d written to Gene once or twice, although he was not, in the general way, much for letter writing.

He felt the blood drain from his face as his gaze raced line by line through the missive.

And yet ... it was a harmless enough letter. He came to the end of it—that stilted schoolboy signing off—and began to read it again more slowly. There was nothing in these neat, guarded lines to give them away. Bat’s fretting to get back to the front was clear—as was his fear for his friends, though he hid that a little better behind the usual raillery. He had even mentioned Edie in passing.

Feeling the eyes of both men upon him, he did his best to keep his expression impassive as he refolded the letter and handed it back to Colonel Reynard. He looked the older man straight in the eyes.

“I don’t understand,” he said.

“What is it you don’t understand, Captain Bryant?” Colonel Reynard inquired.

“I don’t understand why Orton should have such a thing in his possession.” He glanced at Major Chase, but Chase said nothing. Apparently this was Reynard’s show.

Colonel Reynard said with a mildness Bat didn’t much like, “You can think of no reason this man Orton would retain a letter that belonged to you or Lieutenant Roberts?”

“Perhaps Owl dropped it and Orton intended to return it to him.”

“I think not,” Colonel Reynard said.

Bat held his tongue.

“Perhaps Monsieur Orton spoke to you about this letter?”

“No.” Bat made an effort. “If he’d mentioned it to me, I should have asked for it back.” He added, deliberately casual, “Why not?”

“Suppose there was a price attached to its return?” Colonel Reynard suggested.

“Sir?” Bat turned to Major Chase.

Major Chase said, “Answer the question, Captain Bryant.”

Bat said frostily, “Are you suggesting this villain Orton was a blackmailer?” The old earl couldn’t have put more hauteur into it.

After all, what was it but a stupid, boyish, and rather innocent letter? Quite innocent as he compared what had been between Gene and himself to the things Cowboy had taught him. There was nothing in this letter to give them away ... beyond the fact that Bat had written to Owl while home on leave. And what was extraordinary about that? A lot of chaps wrote from home. No, the extraordinary thing would be that Orton had apparently believed the letter worth hanging onto. Perhaps when combined with whatever proof

Cowboy had found on Orton's body it added up to something more damaging.

What had Cowboy found? Bat had to know. Another letter? Bat had written several. He remembered only too well the pain of being separated from Gene, wondering if Gene was even alive when he wrote. It had been unbearable being apart. Knowing Gene was flying into danger every day without Bat to watch his back.

Unmoved by Bat's show of indignation, Colonel Reynard said, "We have found a number of articles in Monsieur Orton's belongings that would lead us to believe he perhaps ... augmented his pay with blackmail."

"Blackmail?" Bat forced a laugh. "I say. What a rum thing. He'd have had to come up with something better than that, you know." He nodded dismissively at the letter and waited, hoping he wasn't giving himself away by so much as a tremor. If they had a more incriminating communication, they would have shown it to him, right?

Right.

They were bluffing. And as he met their twin gazes, Bat knew that they realized he now recognized this—recognized that they had lost this hand. He did not allow his relief to show by so much as a twitch.

"Thank you, Captain Bryant," Major Chase said, and dismissed him.

* * * *

Cowboy rose as Bat slammed into the gazebo.

"Started to think you weren't coming," he said gruffly, and there was a funny note in his voice that Bat didn't stop to analyze.

He slammed into Cowboy, hands digging into his shoulders as he pinned him against the wall. "What did you find on Orton's body?" he demanded furiously. "What was it? *Tell me, goddamn you or I'll kill you myself!*"

Bat had the advantage of surprise, but Cowboy was by far the larger and stronger. He could have broken Bat's hold, could have thrown him off. Instead he put his arms around him, pulling him closer.

"What is it? What happened?"

Something strange and terrible was happening to Bat. As those powerful arms locked around him, drawing him still closer to Cowboy's hard, muscular form, his control seemed to slip. His hands fisted helplessly in Cowboy's tunic, he butted his head against Cowboy's—and he could hear the steady thump of Cowboy's heart against his own—Cowboy was talking to him, but Bat couldn't hear the words because he was crying. Crying for Gene, for himself, for all of them—all the chaps who had died, all the chaps who were going to die—crying for the bloody, goddamned uselessness of it, pointlessness of it. A ripping crash of emotion like a wing folding up, like the entire spread of canvas over the top wing tearing away in the wind and disappearing behind him.

It had happened to him just that way—not long after he'd returned to the front after being shot down the first time. He had been so sure he was going to die. After all, he'd already had his lucky escape. He could not believe he would survive again as his right wing tore away and the plane went out of his control as slowly, then faster and faster, its tail began revolving.

Around and around it had whipped like a top—he felt that same horrifying helplessness now, as though he was caught in a tailspin, plummeting toward the ground,

toward the inevitable smashup.

Except that Cowboy was holding him up, speaking quietly to him. "Tell me. You've got to tell me. What's happened?"

Bat shook his head. He had to get control, but ... so far no luck.

Cowboy stroked Bat's back, kissed his face, kept murmuring. After a time the soft, foolish words sank in.

"You're all right, Aubrey. I won't let anything happen to you. Tell me what's wrong."

I won't let anything happen to you? That would have been funny enough even if Cowboy wasn't half of what had happened. Bat lifted his head, wiped his face on his sleeve, tried to pull free. Cowboy kept his hold.

Bat said, "They've found a letter from me to Gene in Orton's kit."

Cowboy was very still. "You said there wasn't anything for them to find."

Bat wiped his face again. "It's not ... in itself it's nothing. I wrote after I was shot down last summer. The only real ... significance is that Orton kept it. They think he was supplementing his pay with blackmail."

"They?"

"Chase and that old French fox. He knows. I can feel it."

"Shhhh..." Cowboy seemed to be thinking.

Bat sniffed. Already he felt calmer. After all, what were a few tears given the things he and Cowboy had done?

He said, "I can't face being arrested. *Court-martialed?*"

"This is where I came in." Cowboy's eyes slanted his way. "Look, you're not going to prison and you're not going up in front of a firing squad. You're not going to be arrested, so shut up."

"I tell you, they *know*."

"They *don't* know," Cowboy said with certainty. "They're fishing. You're one in a sea of possibilities. Don't you see that?"

Bat stared. Cowboy's mouth was a breath away from his own. He could see the gold glint on his jaw and the blue gleam of the eyes gazing deeply into his. He had a compulsion to cover Cowboy's soft mouth with his own.

Instead he said, "You think Orton was trying it on with some of the other chaps?"

"If all Chase and this colonel found was your letter, they wouldn't be jumping to the conclusion that Orton was a blackmailer. Especially if the letter is as innocuous as you say. He's got other victims in this camp, you can bet on that. Which means Chase and the Frenchie have other suspects."

Bat wondered why he didn't try to free himself. He continued to stand in the circle of Cowboy's arms. He said, "Colonel Reynard knows. I don't know how, but he knows. I could see it in his eyes."

"Well, he's an old copper," Cowboy replied. "I guess he's got a nose for it. It doesn't matter. If worse comes to worst, I'll tell 'em I'm the one who dumped Orton."

"*What?*" Bat freed himself then. "What are you saying?"

Cowboy said coolly, "I'll tell 'em I killed Orton. They'll believe it once they know I dumped Orton's body."

At last Bat said, "Why ... would you do such a thing?"

For the first time a certain self-consciousness crossed Cowboy's hard face. "I told

you. I like you, Aubrey.” He shrugged. “I guess it’s more than that.”

Bat couldn’t seem to think of a word to say. In fact, he wasn’t sure he remembered how to coordinate his tongue and lips.

“Yeah, that’s what I figured,” Cowboy said, watching him struggle. “You think you’re still in love with Gene.”

“I…”

Cowboy said gently, “Maybe you are. But you like what we do together, even if you can’t admit it. You’re aching for it right now. Rigid as a tent pole.” He smiled faintly, glancing down at Bat’s crotch.

Bat didn’t have to look down.

“It’s okay,” Cowboy said in a deep velvety voice. “I’m going to take care of you.”

It was the best it had been thus far: long and slow and loving. They stroked and caressed as though they had all the time in the world, and then Bat lay on his back in the faded cushions and Cowboy knelt between his legs, pierced him through the tight crack of his arse with agonizingly sweet deliberation. Bat had pulled Cowboy down to him. Their bodies rested hot and humid against each other in the chilly room, and then Cowboy began to move, the deep thrusts seeming to keep time with the beat of their hearts.

They kissed, and stroked each other—*pleasured* each other, that was the word—and Bat came right away in shivery jets. Cowboy’s cock jerked and strained, trying for the very heart of him—a few more urgent thrusts and Cowboy was spilling into him.

Afterward they lay in each other’s arms smoking, kissing, and occasionally talking.

“First time I saw you,” Cowboy said. “I thought…” He laughed softly.

“What did you think?” Bat turned his head, rubbing his nose at the dust that puffed up from the old cushions.

He remembered the day Cowboy had turned up with the other new recruits—all dead now. He remembered the confident swagger, the cool way Cowboy had sized them all up, the lazy, deep voice as he introduced himself—everything about the big American had annoyed Bat, all the more because he knew it was an unreasonable reaction. Later, down at the lodge, he and Gene had joked about the Seventh Cavalry.

Cowboy said reminiscently, “I thought you were cute as a newborn foal.”

“*Cute?*” Bat was truly appalled.

“Sure. Tall and quiet and sort of shy.”

“*Shy?*”

“Well. The fact is, I mistook your natural limey repression for something else.”

Bat muttered, “Ridiculous.” Cowboy continued dreamily, “And then those pretty gray eyes of yours looked right through me and you said in that god-awful public school accent, “*I say, another cowboy here to save the day.*”

Bat swallowed hard. “Did I?”

Cowboy was grinning reflectively. “Yep. Just that dry sense of humor of yours.”

Bat winced.

More seriously, Cowboy said, “It was the same day Sandy MacIntosh got shot down and you were feeling raw. I know you better now. I know why you keep a distance from the replacements—why we all do, I suppose.”

Bat grunted.

“Anyway, the nickname stuck.”

“What *is* your name?” Bat asked.

“Aloysius Cooper.”

It suited him. “And what do you plan to do after the war, Aloysius?”

“I expect I’ll be a lawyer like my daddy and his daddy before him.” Cowboy squinted up at Bat through the flickering light of the trees moving above the broken roof of the gazebo. “You ever been to the States?”

Bat shook his head.

“You never know,” Cowboy said.

* * * *

There was the promise of snow the next morning when A Flight set out for first crawl. Bat could taste it in the wind whipping his face, smell it in the bitter cold.

Ambrose was on his right, Cowboy sailing along on his left, the two biplanes shimmering in the first light like golden stars. After the losses of the day before, they planned nothing more strenuous than a learn-the-line for the two new replacements Hutchinson and Close. A stroll in the park, Bat told his new boys, and he hoped it was true.

It was on their way back to the drome that they came upon a squadron of Fokkers flying low beneath them. Excitement rippled through A Flight like a tailwind, for the German pilots had failed to spot them. For a few seconds they traveled in parallel, then Bat stuck the nose of the DH-2 down and dived for the tail of the nearest Fokker.

Belatedly realizing his peril, the pilot of the Fokker tried to outdive Bat. A second Fokker came to his assistance, settling on Bat’s tail. Cowboy peeled off, zooming down and fastening his teeth on the heels of the second Fokker. And just like that, the skies were a battleground once more, every machine pouring streams of tracer bullets into the craft before him, an argument punctuated by the black-and-white puffs of Archie down below as the anti-aircraft guns of both sides joined in.

Bat’s targeted Fokker dropped like a stone—an account almost too easily settled. Two of the other enemy planes streaked for home, the pilots wounded or their machines crippled. Bat scouted for Cowboy and spotted him far down below with three Fokkers on his tail.

He swore and dropped down rapidly, watching as Cowboy turned and rolled, firing three short bursts at his opponents before climbing again in an effort to turn the tables.

Mad as wasps, the Fokkers buzzed after him, keeping up their pursuit and maneuvering to try to reposition on his tail once more. One of the pilots spotted Bat, and behind him, Tubby and Ambrose rushing to catch up. They moved to engage, and a short fierce fight broke out. Machine gun bullets cut through the air while the pilots swerved and climbed and dived, narrowly missing each other—sometimes by only a few feet. One of the Fokkers went down and the remaining two ascended steeply, once more speeding for home and the protection of their own landing field. Tubby and Ambrose gave chase.

Bat watched the retreating planes go with grim satisfaction. Looking down, he was dismayed to see Cowboy sinking to earth. The Spad’s propeller was turning slowly, and Bat knew instinctively that Cowboy’s plane had been struck in some vital part of the engine.

Cool as ever, Cowboy put his machine at an angle and went volplaning down. Bat sped after, quickly overtaking him as he calculated the distance that separated the

American from the far-flung trenches. Cowboy was only seven or eight thousand feet above the ground and the lines were some six miles distant. There was no sign of panic or alarm from the American, but he could hardly fail to be aware of the tightness of his predicament as he coaxed his powerless craft along, gliding like a drunken swallow.

Bat was the one quietly, fervently swearing as he sailed along overhead. In most circumstances an aeroplane might potentially skim along for a mile or so without losing more than a thousand feet altitude. There was a chance Cowboy could make eight miles without engine power provided he managed to stay eight thousand feet above ground. Provided, too, that no ill wind blew against him—and that no enemy bullets found their mark as he sank nearer and nearer to the ground.

Bat flew above the wounded bird, ignoring Cowboy's attempts to wave him off. Archie joined the serenade, and both planes were peppered with shrapnel.

The best-case scenario was that Cowboy might land safely and be taken prisoner. The worst—

But Bat refused to consider the worst. He didn't ignore the miniature eruptions around him so much as he was simply oblivious to them, his entire focus on Cowboy's battle for the lines. The American was gauging speed and distance with the precise judgment of a trick rider—Bat was the one whose hands were wet with perspiration, whose heart tripped. There was simply nothing he could do—nothing but keep Cowboy company until the end. Whatever the end might be.

The ground drew closer and closer to Cowboy's hanging wheels. Bat spied the rear trenches of the Germans, saw shocked white faces staring up as they passed above. Cowboy was doomed to strike the next trench, three hundred yards ahead.

Bat dropped into line beside Cowboy, firing at the trenches, spraying bullets in an attempt to keep the soldiers occupied with something besides taking potshots at RFC planes.

The second row of German trenches appeared below the sinking Spad which skimmed lightly over them.

With rising hope Bat saw that the fields ahead were open and relatively smooth. If Cowboy could land...

He had to land there. There was no other option for him. At the rate he was dropping, if he continued to coast along he would be rolling up at the front line trench of the Huns.

At that moment the Spad touched earth with a teeth-rattling jar, rebounded lightly, and struck again some thirty feet ahead—bouncing over the narrow front line trench and rolling some thirty or forty yards across no-man's-land.

Then there was silence but for the drone of Bat's circling plane and the twang and ping of Cowboy's engine coming to rest.

Cowboy was up and out of the Spad, and setting fire to it before it had stopped quivering. Soldiers from both sides spilled out of the trenches. The air whistled with bullets and yells.

Bat swooped down and landed a hundred yards away. He whistled—not that there was much chance Cowboy had missed his arrival. The Germans certainly hadn't. The Allies were doing their best to cover him which mostly increased the odds of Cowboy getting shot.

Boche bullets kicked up little clouds of dust and weed as Cowboy covered those hundred yards in less than ten seconds.

Reaching the DH-2, Cowboy gave Bat's props a good hard swing, and scrambled onto the fuselage as Bat took off again.

Cowboy's face was black with smoke and oil beneath his goggles, but he was grinning. Bat had never seen anything more beautiful.

* * * *

It was snowing the day of Tubby's funeral, grounding all flights.

Bat stood next to Cowboy and listened to the chaplain while the soft silent snow feathered the hard ground. He was glad of the snow. Glad it would be a day or two before they could fly again—maybe longer if the snow lasted. For the first time he wished that he might never have to fly again. Funny to think how he had dreamed of flying from the time he was small; he'd only been six years old when man first took to the sky. Now he was twenty-three, but he felt nearer a hundred.

*But Day shall clasp him with strong hands,
And Night shall fold him in soft wings*

His eyes met Cowboy's and though they were not touching, he felt as though Cowboy's hand brushed his cheek. Inexplicably, he felt comforted. But perhaps it was not so inexplicable after all. Maybe there was some truth to that poem of Tennyson's. *Better to have loved and lost than never loved at all.* Gene would have understood that.

In the mess that evening, Ambrose made Varlik's toast for Tubby.

"Here's a toast, now! Fill the cup! Though the shadow of fate is on the wall, here's a final toast ere the darkness fall. Fill the cup."

A nice enough toast, but Bat was thinking of the vulgar verses they all knew—and at one time found quite comical. There was a rumble of acknowledgment as Ambrose finished speaking. Everyone drank. The new recruits—even Berkman's monkey.

Cowboy sat down next to Bat at the bar, his shoulder brushing Bat's, and said, "What did Chase want this afternoon?"

Bat met the midnight blue eyes, and his tension lessened. They would be together tonight and he could grieve for Tubby then—grateful for one more sunrise—and one more night. They were lucky to have this, he knew that now; lucky for as long as it lasted—as long as they managed to live.

He said, "Chase told me that ... perhaps God works in mysterious ways."

"What the hell does that mean?"

"Some of those letters they found in Orton's things were Tubby's."

Cowboy frowned, not quite following.

"Apparently when he first came over he managed to get a French girl pregnant. He married her, but ... I don't know what happened. He abandoned her. No one knows the full story. No one ever will now. But somehow Orton found out and was threatening Tubby with exposure."

For a long time, Cowboy was silent. Then he said, "They think Tubby killed Orton?"

Bat smiled without humor. "I don't think so. Not really. He couldn't have dumped Orton's body. He never left the mess that night. Only you and I were unaccounted for at any part of that evening. But we're doing valuable work here, you see. And the French appreciate it, and Chase needs every pilot."

"And," Cowboy said thoughtfully, "Orton wasn't a whole hell lot of use as a mechanic."

“Quite,” said Bat. He drank and then said quietly, “What was the proof you found on Orton’s body?”

“What’s that?”

“The proof you threatened to take to Major Chase. What was it?”

“Oh.” Cowboy stared down at his drink. A faint smile touched his mouth. He said, “There wasn’t anything.”

Bat stared at him. At last, frowning, he said, “What are you saying?”

Cowboy said calmly, “There was no proof. Nothing that could be used in evidence against you. Nothing at all. I made it up.”

“Why?”

“Because I wanted to keep seeing you, and for that to happen I knew I needed some hold over you. At least until you got used to the idea.”

Bat didn’t know what to say. Cowboy looked at him sideways, gave a tiny, sheepish smile. “I told you. I liked you. A lot. I knew you were still in love with Gene. But ... I figured I had something to offer you too, even if you didn’t want to admit it.”

Bat stared down at his glass.

“Now you know,” Cowboy said after a time.

“Yes.”

“So that’s it then. I guess I don’t have a hold on you anymore.”

Bat looked up. “I wouldn’t say that.”

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The End

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