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A SUNLIT WEAPON

A Maisie Dobbs Novel

JACQUELINE WINSPEAR

PROLOGUE

Somewhere over south eastern England

Thursday, October 8th, 1942

Nick had told her about this feeling; a wild rush, a sensation of utter freedom that seemed to course through the veins with every twist and turn at the controls of a Spitfire. He'd described the way the Merlin engine would rumble away as he swooped down over harvests sunlit in summer and mist-drenched in the grip of autumn. Now Jo Hardy loved the Spit as much as Nick had – hardly surprising, as he'd always said the aircraft was a lady in the air. 'It's a woman's kite, if ever there was one,' he'd told her: compact in the cockpit, easy for a petite feminine frame to get in and get out. But Nick – her tall, wonderful Nick, the RAF officer who had swept her off her feet with his silly jokes and impish impressions of fellow officers – never got out. Nick never had a chance to push back the aircraft's hood with scorched hands and escape the flames as his Spitfire crashed to earth.

So much had come to pass since that day – since she received the confirming message of his death from her commanding officer. Jo had

no more tears to shed now. She had been a WAAF – a member of the Women’s Auxiliary Air Force – on duty in the ops room on her shift. Nick knew she was there, headphones clamped to her ears as she scanned the screen in front of her. She was tracking the exact position of the squadron when Nick seemed to lag behind; when, for no apparent reason, he began falling from the sky. She was staring at her radar screen as the other WAAFs turned to her, stunned. Then Nick’s voice came in loud and clear. ‘I’ve copped something. Don’t worry, I’ll land this thing.’ There was an easy laugh that calmed her, a few seconds’ worth of assurance that all would be well. ‘See you later, Josie.’ And then he was gone. The dot had vanished. Another pilot down – and there had not been a Messerschmitt in sight.

Jo had not wasted time. Grief was something to be indulged for just a brief moment, because for every tear that ran down her cheeks, there were thousands of bereaved souls shedding more, their hearts broken for dead husbands and lovers, for dead fathers and mothers, and for children killed during three years of war. Her mother had offered fleeting sympathy, and then counselled, ‘Well, you’ve just got to get on with it now, darling. Just get on with it.’ Ellen Hardy had considered her daughter’s fiancé ‘flighty’ – and wasn’t that an irony? thought Jo, that night as she pressed her face into her pillow and keened her loss. Now the man whose ring she kept in a pocket close to her heart was gone, and her mother was complaining about the means by which Jo had decided to just get on with it – by transferring to the Air Transport Auxiliary. She’d already learned to fly before the war, indulged by a father anxious to annoy his estranged wife by any means possible, and now Jo was in the air, ferrying fighters, bombers, and training aircraft from one air station to another. She had amassed more hours in the cockpit than Nick had under his belt on the day he

died. Yesterday she was at the controls of a Blenheim, tomorrow it could be a Beaufighter or perhaps even a Lancaster, those four massive engines daring her to make a mess of her landing while a gaggle of engineers formed an audience on the ground. Those same men had been shocked when Diana, all five feet two of her, had climbed down from the cockpit of the Lanc she'd ferried to its destination, a bomber station in Northamptonshire. Just Diana, no seven-man crew. That bomber had been lined up for an expert landing by a woman on her own – a woman who had to put pillows on the seat to drive a motor car.

But today – today there had been a Spitfire on Jo's chit. It was the second time she would be ferrying a kite she could take to four hundred miles per hour with ease – if only she were allowed such leeway. But really, who was to know? That first time it took only the usual half an hour with the instruction book, and she'd been up in the air determined to put the Spit through its paces before she landed – with no one around to catch her having some fun. Everyone wanted to fly the Supermarine Spitfire – that's why the American aviatrices came over and joined the ATA even before Pearl Harbour brought thousands of GIs to British soil. Now there was an Argentinian among their number, a Czech, a few Canadians and a Polish girl too, the latter as fearless as her country's fighter pilots who had taken off when the Nazis invaded their country. Those Poles had flown to Britain determined to have their revenge on the Luftwaffe.

Should she risk swooping under a bridge? She had the measure of the Spitfire now and felt like an old hand . . . so . . . well, why not? Last week when Jenny was delivering a Spit to Biggin Hill, she thought she'd execute a couple of barrel rolls before landing her charge – only to shock the RAF officer waiting on the tarmac, red with temper and

at the ready to tear the pilot off a strip for indulging in risky airborne high jinks. There was no love lost between the RAF brass and the ATA. According to a story that had already become legend, the crusty officer was stunned into silence when he saw the aviator pull off ‘his’ helmet as Jenny clambered down to the ground, revealing long blond hair and a winning smile as she approached him, saluted, and said, ‘Good morning, sir. Apparently I’ve got to shift a Hurricane down to Hawkinge. Mind if I have a quick cuppa before I leave?’

Jo had ferried this route before, and though captivated by the fields and farms below as she crossed into Kent bound for Biggin Hill, she kept a keen eye around and above her. Ferry pilots had no ammunition on board, so if a lone-wolf Luftwaffe pilot came out of the clouds in his Messerschmitt, she’d have to move fast – evasive action was the only option to save her own life and a valuable aircraft. And that was her job, her remit – to deliver an aircraft in one piece, because God knows they couldn’t lose any more aeroplanes or pilots.

At last she saw the bridge – they all knew where it was, a railway bridge high enough and wide enough for a thrill. Ease up on the throttle, bring down the nose, level flight under the span and then open her up and climb fast on the other side. Jo felt the rush of adrenaline hammer through her body as she pulled up the Spitfire, the carburettor flooding the engine with fuel for sudden acceleration. She began to laugh. She hadn’t laughed in so long, it was as if shackles were beginning to fall away from her heart. Turning the Spitfire, Jo swooped in low over the fields. That’s when she heard it – a crack aft of the Spit, as if something had snapped, or she’d hit something – or something had blown or flown into the aircraft. She reduced speed, turned and swooped low again, just to make sure she could climb, relieved when she realised she wasn’t losing fuel nor was she on fire.

Perhaps it was a bird, or just one of those sounds that seem to come out of nowhere to keep you on your toes – the gods of flight making sure you were paying attention.

Then she saw him. A man standing by the open door of a barn in the middle of a field, his firearm pointed skyward. She pulled up again and then came in low – but not too low – for another look. And he was firing once more, as if a mere bullet could bring her down, though she knew as well as anyone that a bullet could bring you down if it caught an aircraft in the wrong place.

Jo Hardy manoeuvred her ship once more to loop around the barn, just as another man ran from the open doors to grab the man with the weapon, still pointed skyward. Losing not a second, she identified her landmarks. There was the bridge, and there was a farmhouse. There was the road – and the railway line running close by. The corner of the field was at a fork in the road. Yes, she could find this place again, her mind a map and the coordinates memorised as if she'd pressed pins into paper. Someone had tried to shoot her down, and for once it wasn't a German – and it wasn't a crusty old RAF officer who thought women had no business flying aeroplanes and who used words and official reports as the weapon of choice. Someone had it in for the pilot of an aircraft flying low across the skies over the Garden of England.