

# WINGS OVER VALLETTA





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*For Jonathan, always*



# Chapter One

16th January 1941

‘How many bombers do the Italians have?’

Michael Fortini grinned from under his shock of dark hair, tomato from lunch still on his top lip.

Kitty turned from writing *Chapter Three* on the blackboard, chalk poised in her hand. Dust floated in the sunlight streaming through the tall classroom windows, an unusually warm day for January. She bit her lip trying to stop herself laughing. Heavens, he must be the cheekiest eleven-year-old in the whole of Valletta, God love him, but the fact she didn’t want to stop his endless questions – it had been ‘When will Malta get Spitfires?’ two minutes ago, as if *she* knew – showed just how much she wasn’t cut out for teaching. Especially Dickens. She couldn’t believe she was still here, really, four years on. After all, joining the Britannia School had been yet another of Father’s bloody ideas to ‘cheer her up’, after they arrived on the island.

Michael threw a paper plane, RAF roundels neatly drawn on the wings, across the room and tilted back, so his gas mask fell off the chair and thumped to the ground. The children giggled.

‘*Ghoxxrin miljun,*’ called out Giuseppe.

‘English, please.’ Kitty smiled at the little boy crammed into a sweater that was far too small for him.

‘Twenty million.’ He grinned round at the children. ‘At least that’s how many shillings Michael would pay for a *ħobza bĳz-zejt*.’

They all laughed. Everyone knew how Michael loved his tomato panne. Kitty smiled. Let them laugh. After all, outside these walls there was so much to cry about, what with the island besieged and the Italians bombing them. At least Father’s jewel of the fleet, HMS *Illustrious*, had made it to safety. The whole of Valletta had gone down to Grand Harbour to cheer as tugs pulled the listing, damaged aircraft carrier in. One day of joy at least.

Miss Lavigne, Adela, must have been having the same thoughts, as across the corridor, she was thumping the piano and singing a rousing chorus of ‘Happy Days Are Here Again’. That nightclub voice of hers was wasted on the little ones, but still, it was a wonder that old dragon, Miss Mazelli, hadn’t swept in to stop her.

As the laughter quieted, Kitty waved a copy of the novel.

‘Class, let’s get back to Pip—’

The high-pitched wail of the air raid siren drowned out her words.

Even after all these months, that whine still made Kitty’s stomach drop, the hairs on the back of her neck prickle. The children jumped up.

‘Hurry, children. Go to the shelter,’ Kitty cried, as they grabbed their gas masks and scrambled into the corridor.

‘Not again.’ Adela rolled her big eyes at Kitty. She led a small child in each hand, herding the rest before her towards the arched front doors.

‘Father warned me they might come after *Illustrious* today.’

‘*Zut alors.*’ Fear shone in Adela’s dark eyes as she glanced down at the small, frightened children. ‘Let’s hope it’s over quickly, then.’

‘Yes. You go first.’ Kitty held the front door open, glancing behind her to check all the children had left her classroom. ‘I’ll give you a hand with them when everyone’s out. They get so upset.’

Kitty ushered her class out onto the narrow, stepped street and glanced up at the tall old houses with their covered wooden balconies, brightly painted in dark greens, sky blues and beetroot reds. Washing strung between the windows flapped in the breeze. How could this familiar old street be dangerous?

But already overhead, engines droned and the *rat-a-tat* of anti-aircraft guns firing echoed from the old stone bastions round Grand Harbour.

‘Hurry, hurry,’ Kitty called as the children ran ahead, gas masks banging against their legs. They bounded like the milk goats up the steep limestone steps of St John Street, joining the people streaming into the sandbagged shelter on the corner. Opposite, Mr Zejtun slammed the shutter down on his bakery and hurried up the steps.

*Crump, crump, crump.* Explosions echoed and smoke and the smell of cordite, sharp like nail polish, filled the air. The aircraft drone grew louder.

Kitty glanced down the far end of the street to the blue sea, sparkling in the sunshine. Across the water, in the dockyards on the far side of Grand Harbour, staccato guns fired from the decks of the huge aircraft carrier. Above it, a trail of black and white puffs of smoke was stitched across the sky, where rows of

black crosses roared. A bomb whistled as it fell, exploding in a deafening boom. Kitty clapped her hands to her ears. A huge fountain of water blew up over the ship.

‘They *are* after *Illustrious!*’ Kitty shouted.

God, was Father over there today?

‘*Malajr! Malajr!*’ Stout Miss Mazelli bustled past with the older children. ‘Quick!’

‘Hurry, *chérie,*’ Adela called as she struggled with two little ones up the shallow stone steps, her voice almost lost over the boom of the guns.

Crikey, even in the middle of an air raid, Adela still exuded Parisian chic, juggling her handbag, her legs wobbling in pale blue heels. But little Carmela Cortis trailed behind, bless her, struggling to hold both her mask and her teddy.

Kitty swept her up in her arms.

The little girl’s chubby legs clung round her waist, one soft arm gripping tight round her neck, the other clutching the bear. Kitty’s heart squeezed. How she adored this little girl. Alice would be the same age as her now.

Carmela pressed her soft curls against Kitty’s cheek and Kitty breathed in her sweet smell of warm skin and Pears soap. Would Alice smell like this now?

Kitty checked in her pocket for the little photograph wallet, her talisman. Still there, still safe.

Stop it, stop it. Focus on the children.

‘It’s alright, sweetheart, I’ve got you. Not far now.’ She hurried up the steps, passing Mr Manduca, who dropped a crate of tomatoes and ran, not caring where they rolled.

The noise was deafening. Another huge explosion, too close, rattled the windows in the buildings. Kitty startled. Carmela

cried out, dropped the teddy. They watched, as if in slow motion, as the golden-furred bear tumbled down the steps. He landed ten yards away, face down, outside a café, caught by the leg of a table. An abandoned coffee cup still steamed on top.

‘Teddy!’ screamed Carmela, her hand a starfish reaching for him.

‘Leave it, Kitty!’ Adela shouted up ahead.

‘My teddy. Teddy!’ Carmela’s distraught eyes burnt into Kitty’s.

An echo of another look, years before, when she’d let another little girl down. Kitty blinked.

She had a choice this time.

Quick as a flash she raced up to Adela.

‘Take her!’ she yelled, thrusting Carmela into Adela’s arms.

‘No, Kitty!’

A split-second look passed between them, Adela’s dark eyes aghast.

Kitty turned and ran back down the steps. Huge shadows swooped across the sunlit street. She glanced up. Aircraft like birds of prey with strange bent gull wings blocked out the blue sky. She froze. Arrow shapes of five, dozens of them, wave after wave.

What the hell was going on? She’d never seen so many aircraft before. She pressed her hands to her ears, the roar of so many engines making her very insides vibrate.

Hot metal shrapnel whizzed past her shoulder. She shrieked, jumped aside, as it clattered, still smoking, on the step beside her. Her heart slammed against her ribs. Shrapnel drummed like hail on the steps near the bear. She screamed.

The shrill whistle of a bomb dropping. She flinched, ducking. Christ, was it overhead? Please God, not here, not now.

She dashed down the last few steps, cursing her too-tight T-bar shoes, and grabbed the bear. Sweat slicked her back. Too close, the bomb exploded. A deafening crash, louder than thunder, the rumbling of tumbling masonry, shattering glass. The ground shook like an earthquake. A shower of thick dust poured on her head and shoulders. Choking smoke filled her lungs and she staggered, coughing. She glanced up, terrified the houses might collapse.

Up ahead, the Air Raid Precaution warden at the shelter frantically blew his whistle.

It was then she heard it. A chilling, high-pitched scream that drilled into her ears and her soul. She glanced back at Grand Harbour, swathed in thick grey smoke, as a plane dropped in a steep dive like an arrow, aiming for *Illustrious's* deck. She watched, mesmerised, as at the very last second, the plane released its bomb and pulled right up. The boom of an explosion echoed across the harbour and a fountain of water, taller than the ship, sprayed up.

She took a sharp breath.

Stukas.

She'd seen them on the Gaumont News at The Majestic.

Her heart pounded.

Christ, was this the Nazis?

She turned, fixed her eyes on the shelter door and raced back up the street.

'*Chérie*, are you alright?' Adela pulled her into a tight hug. '*Mon Dieu!* Are you hurt?'

'I'm fine, really.'

But Kitty trembled. What had she been thinking? She handed

the bear to Carmela, whose eyes lit up with joy as she buried her face in its fur. Kitty sank onto the bench. She brushed the dust off her pale green cardigan and did her best to throw a reassuring smile at the children who stared up at her in the gloom, their eyes wide with fear.

‘You could have been killed!’ Adela whispered. In the candlelight, the whites of her eyes glittered in her face. She gestured at Carmela, cuddling the teddy. ‘And for a toy?’

‘I had to.’

Their eyes met.

‘I know, *chérie*.’

Loss washed over Kitty, triggered, as it so often was, when she least expected it, by the cry of a newborn, a mother kissing a small child, a little girl playing hopscotch. The worst thing was that over the years she had grown used to missing her, but that was not the same thing as getting over it, as Mother and Father thought she had.

Adela smiled and shook her head. ‘You’re an idiot.’ She nudged Kitty with her shoulder. ‘But a brave idiot.’

Kitty squeezed Adela’s hand, grateful she understood. The only person who did, really. The only person she had ever confided in about Alice. And Adela had been a complete brick about it, hadn’t judged her, like the rest of the world had, this determined young woman who’d fled to Fez with five francs, a Josephine Baker songbook and a dream.

Kitty had trusted her from the day they’d met in the school staff lavatory, as Adela changed into a slinky red dress and heels that should have had Miss Mazelli firing her on the spot. ‘*Chérie*, can you zip me up?’ Adela had asked her, as if people changed into evening dresses every day after teaching at school.

Kitty, stunned, had obliged. 'I'm singing at The Star tonight, but don't tell anyone.' And Adela had winked and climbed out of the window to escape through the alleyway.

She'd brought colour and life back into Kitty's grey world back then. Still did.

An explosion rocked the tunnel, cut deep into the limestone rock. They instinctively ducked and covered their heads. Dirt and grit showered from the ceiling, catching in Kitty's hair, filling her nostrils.

God, would she ever get used to this?

She glanced round the mattresses and outstretched legs, people crammed on benches and folding chairs in the low-ceilinged shelter. The musty air was thick with the odour of damp wool, bodies and fear. Here and there, candles and oil lamps flickered from niches in the walls, illuminating pinned-up pictures of the Blessed Virgin. An old woman in a headscarf, fingers busy on her worn rosary beads, muttered a prayer. No one was playing cards or knitting, like they usually did. Everyone sat stiff, tense, silent.

*Boom, boom, boom.*

Explosions thundered above. Such relentless ferocity – it was like nothing she'd heard before. The shelter filled with smoke. Kitty coughed, her throat sore from the caustic dust, and helped the children pull on their gas masks.

Michael rocked, his arms round his knees.

'Will my Omm be alright?'

'Sweetheart, of course she will. She'll be in a shelter with your little sister.'

God, Kitty hoped her own mother had gone to a shelter too. She usually sat through air raids in her favourite wing-backed

armchair in the drawing room. ‘That little Fascist Mussolini isn’t going to drive me underground,’ she always said, unswerving as ever. Please let her have gone.

Even the older children with Miss Mazelli were trying hard not to cry, shutting their eyes or pressing their hands to their ears.

Carmela sucked her thumb, tears trickling down her cheeks, and Kitty pulled her onto her lap.

‘Me want Omm.’

‘I know, poppet.’ Kitty stroked her hair. ‘It’s alright, you’re safe here.’

She kissed the top of Carmela’s velvet dark hair as Carmela’s rosebud mouth whispered to Ted. But it was her lashes, long and dark, fluttering on her pale cheeks, that reminded her of another set of lashes on baby cheeks. Kitty shut her eyes.

Where was Alice now? Also huddled and scared, perhaps in some London Underground station? Her chest tightened. Would someone be taking good care of her?

As if she could read her thoughts, Adela leant across and took her hand. ‘*Chérie*, she will be alright.’ Her gentle brown eyes stared deep into Kitty’s. ‘And you – you must forgive yourself.’

A lump filled Kitty’s throat. She blinked and looked away.

A deafening crash shook the walls. Carmela whimpered and Kitty held her tight. Dust poured from the rough-hewn ceiling.

‘*Mon Dieu*, will the roof hold?’ Adela stared up at it, terrified. ‘There’ll be nothing left of Valletta.’

‘Holy Mother of God.’ An old man in a knitted waistcoat jumped to his feet. ‘What the hell’s going on? The Italians usually only send one or two planes to bomb us.’

‘This isn’t the Italians.’ The ARP warden by the shelter door

stepped forward, straightening his tin hat. 'It's Hitler. He's finally sent the bloody Luftwaffe here.'

No one spoke.

Fear settled like a dense fog. They all knew what had happened when the Germans invaded Europe last year. The Nazi swastika flying over Paris . . .

Kitty's heart thudded. Were they to be invaded? Was she going to die here, on this island? Never know anything about her daughter? Not even know if she was alive?

She had to find her.

But only Father knew. Only Father knew where he had taken her all those years ago, and he had never told Kitty. It was in the child's best interests, he'd said. And lost and scared, back then, she'd believed him. Hadn't believed she deserved to be a mother.

Guilt stabbed at her insides.

Well, no more.

Kitty straightened her shoulders, filled with a sudden energy. She wasn't beaten down as she had been five years ago. She was thirty-two and wiser now.

She had to get home and speak to Father. Make him tell her where Alice had been taken.

Then she would find her daughter.