



ON  
WINGS OF  
DEVOTION

THE CODEBREAKERS ♦ 2

ROSEANNA M. WHITE

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This is a work of historical reconstruction; the appearances of certain historical figures are therefore inevitable. All other characters, however, are products of the author's imagination, and any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, is coincidental.

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To Kim,  
for all your enthusiasm  
and encouragement over the years.  
I'm so blessed to count you as a friend.



Be merciful unto me, O God, be merciful unto me: for my soul trusteth in thee: yea, in the shadow of thy wings will I make my refuge, until these calamities be overpast.

Psalm 57:1



# 1



**CHARING CROSS HOSPITAL  
LONDON, ENGLAND  
1 FEBRUARY 1918**

A stranger stalking down the street shouldn't make her hands tremble in anticipation. Arabelle Denler forced her breathing to calm, forced an easy smile to her lips for the soldier whose bandage she'd just changed, and stood with the old bandage balled up in her bowl. "Is there anything else you need, Captain?"

The thrashing of his head from side to side may have been the answer to her question. Or it may have been simple agony. Poor chap. He'd just arrived in Charing Cross Hospital yesterday after ordnance had stolen his entire left leg.

"Ara!" The stage whisper came from the hallway, where Eliza, one of the volunteer nurses, motioned her frantically.

He'd be stomping down the street any moment. Brooding and aloof and mysterious and so handsome that just looking at him could make one's heart crack a bit.

She resisted the urge to dart out. Black Heart, as the papers had dubbed him, was of no concern to her. She had a fiancé. And more, she had a purpose. Right here, right now. Resting a hand

on the captain's shoulder, she closed her eyes and whispered a quiet prayer. Only after her *amen* did she move away, her pace no faster than it ever was. The fact that she didn't stop at any other cots in the ward had nothing to do with the view out the window and everything to do with the fact that her shift was over and she needed to deliver these bloodied bandages to the laundry on her way out.

If the window facing Agar Street happened to be on the way to said laundry, that was pure coincidence.

And if she went into the little room where the nurses and volunteers took their brief breaks rather than directly to her destination, she could blame it on Eliza, who seized her by the arm and tugged her into the cupboard of a room with a giggle. "Hurry."

Arabelle rolled her eyes, even as she knew it was more to cover the thumping of her own pulse than because she found their daily ritual silly. She slid the bowl of sullied bandages onto a table and quickly washed her hands before golden-haired Eliza pulled her over to the window.

"There!" Susan, a pretty girl of perhaps eighteen who had been volunteering here for only a half year, leaned into the windowsill until her cheek was pressed to the pane.

Arabelle tugged her back an inch. Gracious, but sometimes these girls made her feel ancient. She was only twenty-five, but she couldn't recall ever acting so giddy simply because a man was walking down the street. "A bit of propriety, if you please, Sue. He could look up again, and you don't want him to catch you staring."

The girls had about fainted dead away last week when he'd glanced directly up at their window and sent them all a devil-may-care grin. As if he knew exactly what they were doing and the effect he had.

"What *are* you three doing?"

Arabelle turned to smile at another volunteer—who was usually gone long before this hour of the day. "Lily! What are you still doing here?"

Lilian Blackwell, her red-gold brows lifted, sauntered into the room. “I had to swap my hours today so I could help my mother with something this morning.” She drew even with them and peered out the window. “What’s going on out there?”

Eliza bumped Susan companionably on the shoulder. “She has no idea what she misses every day. *He* walks by, Lil. The fellow the papers have dubbed Black Heart. I declare, he must be the handsomest man in all England.”

Something odd flashed in Lily’s eyes. Recognition, perhaps. Ara tilted her head. “Do you know him? He’s working at Whitehall now it seems. With your father?”

Lily’s smile was vague. She backed away from the window. “I couldn’t say. Daddy works with so many chaps, you know. Though I can certainly assure you he isn’t one my mother has invited over to dine with us.”

Eliza and Susan’s laughter turned to playful shoving as they each jockeyed for prime position at the window.

“Need I separate you two?” Arabelle made a show of putting a hand on each of their arms and pushing them a few inches apart, positioning herself between them as a barrier.

Not so *she* had a better view out the window.

Oh, fiddlesticks. Who did she think she was fooling?

Lily had retreated to the door. “Well, I’d best hurry along. This odd schedule today has me all sorts of discombobulated. I’ll see you in the morning, Ara. Eliza, Sue, it was nice to actually work beside you today.”

A chime of farewells soon turned into excited exclamations of “There he is! He’s coming!”

Arabelle drew in a deep breath even as her eyes sought the familiar stride of Black Heart. He was stomping at a faster clip than usual down the street. No teasing grin would be shot up at them today—that was clear from the angry set of his jaw and the hands clenched into fists at his side.

His nickname was no great mystery. One had only to watch him for a few moments to see the resentment—some would call

it hatred—that held him in its teeth. Arabelle’s fingers settled on the windowsill. She’d never met the man. But she knew him. Knew how the bitterness could eat at one, gnawing away until there was nothing left but sinew and bone, no heart to speak of.

Just looking at him took her back to those dark days. The days before Aunt Hettie, before the Braxtons, before the Lord had shown her how He’d always been by her side. When it was just her and a dead mother and a missing father and a village rector who hadn’t a clue what to do with a seething ten-year-old girl.

*Father God, he wears his pain like a uniform.* She watched Black Heart pound the pavement ever nearer to their window. *But you can reach him, as you reached me. Touch his heart, Lord. Break it, if you must. Show him that you’re there, right there beside him.*

She’d prayed nearly the same prayer every day for months. Every day he stalked by Charing Cross on his way home from the Old Admiralty Building, where he’d somehow ended up instead of in front of a firing squad. To hear the papers tell it, he’d killed his entire squadron—willfully. Five flying aces taken out in their prime by his jealousy and hateful nature, all because of an argument with one of the pilots.

He chose that moment to glance up. No smile upon his lips, not today. And who knew what he could really see behind the glass. But it felt as though he looked directly at her, straight into her eyes. As if with that glance he was challenging her daily prayer for him. *God isn’t here*, that look said. *No one is.*

But He was. And He would show him. She knew He would.

“I could bring a smile back to those lips,” Eliza said to the glass, a wistful look in her eyes.

“You? No, he needs someone young and fresh and hopeful to change him.” Susan grinned down at him, though he didn’t look up again.

Arabelle took a step backward. “I wouldn’t put any hope in changing a man, Sue. None of us can change anyone else—unless they want to do it themselves.” But the Lord could. And

from the first moment she'd spotted that angry pilot, she had the strangest feeling that He was chasing him.

"I meant *inspire* him to change." Susan patted her hair, pinned just so under her white kerchief, as if Black Heart would be able to see it from the street.

"Are you girls wasting time at the window again?" The ward matron brought them all around with a start, her nearly permanent scowl etched into place between her brows. She leveled a finger at the lot of them. "Back to your posts, or I'll have you all reassigned, and you'll never be on this side of the building again."

Arabelle lifted her brows. Her shift had been officially over for twenty minutes, but she'd wanted to take care of the unfortunate captain before she left. The cantankerous Nurse Wilcox had no right to badger her, though Susan and Eliza were only halfway through their own shifts. Which was, perhaps, why they scurried out with mumbled apologies. Well, that and the fact they were in the Voluntary Aid Detachment and Arabelle was a trained nurse, which gave her a bit more authority. She planted her hands on her hips. "I'm on my way out, Nurse Wilcox."

Wilcox sniffed and turned from the room. "Be on your way, then. I'll not tolerate you idling about when you're not working, setting a poor example for the other impressionable young ladies."

Arabelle reclaimed the bowl of soiled bandages and pasted a smile into place. "Of course. We wouldn't want them to pick up any bad habits." *Like scowling at and judging absolutely everyone.*

The matron sent that narrowed gaze over her shoulder. "Are you being disrespectful, Miss Denler?"

"Wouldn't dream of it." Aloud, anyway. She didn't need the position, not in terms of the pittance it paid. But she certainly needed the occupation. Best not to make her superior *too* angry with her. Though why the hospital matron, Nurse Jameson, tolerated Wilcox's attitude Arabelle didn't dare to guess.

By the time Arabelle reached the doorway, Wilcox had hustled

off to terrorize someone else, leaving her free to turn toward the laundry.

Another friend slid into place beside her—a friend who routinely exasperated the matron, very much on purpose. “Did she catch you staring out the window at a certain grounded pilot again?”

Arabelle shot a warm smile at their most famous volunteer. “I was not *staring*, Your Grace. I was praying for him.”

“Mm-hmm.” Brook Wildon, the Duchess of Stafford, looped her arm with Arabelle’s and leaned close. “You and your father are still coming to dinner tomorrow, aren’t you?”

“Yes. It’s been ages since I’ve seen Ella and Rowena and—”

“He’ll be there.” Brook punctuated her statement—and Arabelle’s stumble—with a grin. “Thought that might silence you.”

Silence her? It baffled her. She couldn’t imagine that man sitting down to a swanky-as-the-war-allowed dinner party in a duke’s home. “But—”

“You know my husband served with him at Northolt. Not in the same squadron, of course, but he knows him well.” Brook tucked a bobbed curl behind her ear and steered them toward the back stairs. Which was a good thing, because Arabelle had forgotten where she was supposed to be going. “He’s been wanting Camden to come to dinner for months, and he’s finally accepted.”

*Now?* To the same dinner party Arabelle was attending?

As if reading her thoughts, Brook offered another maddeningly cheeky smile. “Fortuitous indeed, since we needed him for an even number. Otherwise you would have been without a partner.”

Arabelle gripped her bowl and prayed the look she sent her friend was withering. “Don’t smile at me like that, Brook. You know perfectly well I’m engaged.”

“What I know is that Edmund Braxton is nothing to you but duty, and you deserve more from life.” She paused at the top of the stairs. “You deserve someone to make you genuinely happy. Someone to *love* you.”

The tightness of her throat didn't lessen any with a swallow. "Such talk has no place in this world. Not anymore."

"Oh, don't be a ninny. Love always has a place," said the woman who'd had the good fortune of falling in love with her best friend.

Arabelle lifted her chin a notch. "Let's not be foolish, Brook. Our generation of men has been reduced to a minimum, and I'm fortunate to have a fiancé at all. I cannot hope for one who came to me for reasons of love."

Brook's green eyes sparked. "Of course you can."

"No. There are exactly one million two hundred thousand reasons a man would choose me for his wife, and none of them are love or attraction."

Brook folded wool-clad arms over her chest. She was dressed to leave for the day, too, but would go from the front, as that's where her driver would be waiting. "You are more than your aunt's fortune."

Absolutely. She was also her father's heir, if he didn't manage to spend what remained of *his* half of the Denler fortune after the war was over. Not that she'd put any stock in *that*. Adventure still waited in the world, after all, and Lawrence Denler wasn't one to sit back and let other men find it in his stead.

Arabelle held tightly to her bowl and moved on to the stairs. "Say hello to the boys for me."

"Ara."

"I'd better hurry. I'm running late again—don't want Father to worry." She didn't pause to await another chastisement from her friend. Though Brook was more than capable of chasing after her, if chastise she truly wanted to do. But she must have decided that the next round of their eternal "to marry for love or convenience" debate could wait for another day.

Only when Arabelle had reached the bottom of the stairs, and the heat and smells from the laundry wafted out to greet her, did she pause. Drag in a breath. Let her nostrils flare. Maybe she didn't love Brax, not like Brook did her Justin. But Arabelle had made her choice with eyes wide open. Because she *did* love

his family. His home. And without her—or more correctly, her inheritance—he stood to lose it. His aging mother would be reduced to a pittance to live on. And dear Sarah, who had helped Arabelle through that dark patch of her own life, would be sacked as housekeeper.

She couldn't do that to them. Not when it was within her power to help. It was why she'd said an eager "Yes" the moment Brax came to her after her aunt's death and proposed. He'd been clear, honest, forthright. He respected her, *liked* her enough to be up front about his reasons. She'd just inherited a sizable fortune. He needed it to keep Middlegrove running. They could have an amiable, friendly marriage, built on a solid foundation. After the war, he'd give her the family she craved. She'd keep his ancestral home from ruin.

They'd both win.

Four years ago, it had sounded noble and good. Four years was a lifetime ago.

Well. Nothing would be accomplished by dillydallying outside the laundry. She bustled in, deposited the stained bandages, and then hurried back up to collect her hat and coat. A few minutes later, she'd said her farewells to Eliza, Susan, and her other friends and stepped into the bite of a London winter wind.

She joined the other silent pedestrians on the street, bustling along to escape the bluster of February. She'd been fortunate to find a position here, a mere twenty-minute walk from her home in Westminster. Father would be waiting. Probably. Maybe. Unless he'd gone to the Explorers Club again to compare stories with the other adventurers stuck at home while U-boats prowled the seas.

Paper crackled in her pocket when her satchel brushed against it. She'd had a letter from Brax yesterday but had waited until lunch today to read it. His missives came regularly, once every two weeks. No lines of poetry or waxing on about their postponed dreams. Just facts. But that was all she required, and all she sent in return.

This one read more like a newspaper article on the advances

in the field of naval diving than a letter from a man to his sweetheart. Which, granted, made her smile. He'd always been fascinated with all things maritime. As a child, he'd been obsessed with the revelation that Arabelle's father owned a yacht and had sailed it across the Atlantic to Central America. He'd not been put off in the slightest by Ara's snappish answers to his questions. Thoughts of her father, who was at the time missing in the wilds of that distant continent, hadn't exactly been what she'd wanted to dwell on.

Arabelle turned right onto the Strand, holding her coat closed a little more tightly. She nearly ran the last stretch of her daily trek, until the familiar views of Buckingham Palace filled her vision. She turned toward the row of townhouses directly across from the palace. Naturally, the one Aunt Hettie had purchased had a floor more than the ones adjoining. Because, she'd said, if she was going to abandon her villa in Italy, she'd do it in the height of English style.

A waste of money, to be sure. But it was home.

Ara bustled up the steps to the door, which opened before she even reached it.

Parks gave her a warm grin as she came inside. "Another cold one, Miss Denler?"

"Unfortunately." She returned the young butler's smile. After dear old Harcourt passed away last year, it had been nearly impossible to find a replacement for him, as so many men were caught up in the war effort. Parks had already been to the front and sent home again with an injury that made him unfit for duty, though it didn't hinder his abilities in the house. "Is Father at home?"

Shutting the door behind her, Parks motioned upward. "In his study."

Parks's sister, Ruth, stepped forward with a hand out. "May I take your coat, miss?"

These siblings were, at present, the sum total of their live-in staff. They had a cook, but she lived elsewhere. "Thank you, Ruth."

After handing over her outerwear, she jogged up the eternal flights of stairs.

Gaslights—blocked from the street by the dark curtains that regulations demanded—shone from Father’s study as she neared its doors. She tapped on the doorframe.

He didn’t look up. She hadn’t expected him to, not when she saw he had a map tacked to the wall and was, inexplicably, dangling upside down from the edge of his desk, looking at it.

“Father. What in the world—”

“My question exactly, sweetling. What in the world was I thinking when I drew this map? I have it wrong, all wrong. The ridge of that mountain didn’t continue northward in this stretch. I can see it in my mind’s eye. I viewed it from the peak of the next mountain over, you know. Only at a different angle.”

She leaned her shoulder into the doorpost. “If you slip off your desk again—”

“You’ll patch me up as you did last time. Handy thing, having a nurse for a daughter. I told the boys at the club as much just last week.” He put down a weathered hand to the floor, though. “You really ought to come with me on my next expedition. You’d be invaluable.”

“Mm.” She folded her arms over her chest, pressing her lips against a laugh as her father tried to lever himself back up. He wasn’t exactly a young man anymore, but according to him, Lawrence Denler was still fitter and sprier than any explorer the world over. “I’ll be married by the time you set sail again, and Brax may have something to say about his bride heading off into the wild blue yonder.”

“Bah.” Apparently giving up on pushing himself back upright, he placed both palms on the floor and instead pushed off the desk with his feet, turning half a cartwheel and nailing the landing as Arabelle straightened and gasped her protest of the move.

His face bobbed back upright with a grin better suited for a boy of five than a man of fifty. “There we are. And I say no one

has really lived until they've tasted a bit of adventure. Come with me, Ara. We'll find Atlantis together. Write a few history books."

Leave everything—and everyone who mattered—behind, he meant. Chase after what was always elusive instead of holding tight to what was right before one's nose. She dug her fingers into her palms. Bit back the angry answer that still, after all these years, wanted so desperately to come out.

She wouldn't. She *wouldn't* speak it. She shook her head. "Don't forget that we're dining with the Staffords tomorrow. I don't want to have to hunt you down at the club again."

His smile was impish, bright, crooked, and pierced by the same single dimple in his left cheek that she knew occupied her own. "The duchess would go with *her* father into the wilds, I daresay."

A truth that made her laugh, chasing away that old pain. "I daresay she would. How unfortunate for you that you had me for a daughter instead of her."

"Nonsense." With the same gusto he'd used to vault off his desk, he came to her side and planted a loud kiss on her forehead. Not many men could achieve that feat, but she'd inherited her unusual height from him, after all. "I'll get you out of England yet. You'll see, sweetest. You'll see the allure of it once you've had a taste."

For some reason she couldn't decipher, his claim made a pair of stormy eyes and an angry posture fill her mind's eye. She shook it away. It wasn't that she didn't understand the wanderlust. It was that she knew its cost.

He tipped up her chin until her gaze met his. "I've always come home, Ara."

Eventually. Thus far. Her smile felt small and bare upon her lips. "And I'm sure you always will. Until the time you don't."

She'd never subject her own family to that question. All she wanted was a steady home, a husband who returned to it each night, and children who could trust she would *be there*. She may not be beautiful or clever or alluring, but she could offer Brax that much.

And he'd go off diving into the depths of the sea every chance he got, until the time *he* didn't come home.

With a sigh, she turned away from her father. Perhaps she should have promised her fortune to a landlocked gentleman whose estates were on the rocks instead.