

A Foreign Field

Gillian Chan

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This book is for all the “eagles,” young and old.
May you find friendly skies in which to fly.



Per Ardua ad Astra
Through Adversity to the Stars

—The motto of the Royal Air Force

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Gillian Chan
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ONE

“Colin?” Ellen’s voice bounced through the house. “Colin!” Her voice was sharper now. She just knew that her brother had sneaked out when she’d gone into the kitchen to check that the potatoes weren’t boiling over. She stamped her foot, then felt silly. Colin was probably halfway to the air base already, even though Dad had forbidden him to go there. As if that would have stopped Colin. He would just try not to get caught. He was crazy about planes and would spend all day lying outside the fence at the end of the runway, watching the student pilots practice.

“Laddie,” their father had said, his Scottish accent thick, as it always was when he was trying to sound stern, “you’re not to go there. There’s a war on, and those young men are here to train for combat, not to provide amusement for starry-eyed schoolboys!”

Colin had hung his head and said, “Yes, Dad,” in a meek voice, but Ellen had seen what her father hadn’t — Colin’s fingers firmly crossed behind his back.

Ellen sighed and flopped down on the bottom step. If she went after Colin, dinner would spoil, and if she took everything off the stove, she would have a lot to explain once her parents got home and found no dinner waiting. It just wasn't fair. She ran her fingers through her thick, curly hair. Dad's work hours were longer than ever, and since Stewart had been reported missing at Dieppe in August, her mother had thrown herself into every kind of war work imaginable. It was all very well that it took Mum's mind off Stewart, and that she wanted to do her bit; but Ellen was left to try to control Colin and to keep the house going, too. Her friends weren't expected to do half of what she had to do — Barb and Deanna never got to see her outside school anymore. Besides, Mum wasn't the only one worried about Stewart.

Ellen smiled slightly. There was a certain guilty pleasure in feeling sorry for yourself. "Nobody likes me. Everybody hates me. Think I'll go and eat worms!" She repeated the rhyme her father always sang to them when they were whining about their lot in life. Her smile got broader and she started to dance along the hallway, stomping her feet to the rhythm as she shouted the words. She spun round, her arms held wide. "NObody likes ME! EVERYbody hates ME! THINK I'll go and EAT WORMS." Ellen's whirling dance stopped abruptly as she collided with the front door swinging inward. She fell back on the floor, and found herself looking up at two pairs of legs.

One set was instantly recognizable: scabby and

bony, slightly chapped, protruding from knee-length britches, socks half mast. Colin. The little brat had deigned to come home. She was all set to let rip when she checked the other set of legs. Blue serge — that particular shade of blue that belonged only to the Air Force. Ellen clambered to her feet — Graham must have got an unexpected pass and hitchhiked down from Trenton to see the family. Her eyes blurred with tears, Ellen threw her arms around Graham, only to step back immediately. She should have had to reach up to hug him, but whoever was standing there was about her height and much thinner than her burly brother. A wash of embarrassment coursed through Ellen. She hardly dared look at the stranger and certainly couldn't bring herself to speak.

Standing in the doorway, his face as deep a crimson as hers, was a young man in an RAF uniform. In one hand, he held his cap; the other had a tight grip on Colin's upper arm. Stuttering, he pushed Colin forward. "Excuse me, miss, is this your brother?"

Ellen decided that if he was going to ignore the mortifying way she had thrown her arms around him, so would she. "Yes," she said, but her voice was puzzled. Why had this complete stranger brought Colin home? "Has he got into some sort of mischief?" Before the young man could answer, Ellen turned on Colin. "Dad's going to kill you. He'll have your guts for garters if you've been messing around again!"

Colin looked mutinous. "I didn't mean anything. I just wanted a closer look, that's all."

Ellen glared at Colin, but he refused to meet her eye and tried to shrug off the stranger's hand. Confident that Colin was not going to run now he was home, the stranger let go of his arm. Colin moved away and made a big show of rubbing it.

The young man spoke. "Look, it was something and nothing. No harm was done this time, but it could be dangerous."

Ellen sighed. This was all too much. She had no idea what had happened, and knew she wouldn't get a straight answer out of Colin. "Look, you'd better come in and explain. I haven't any tea, but I could offer you a lemonade. I made some this morning." Ellen felt proud of herself, knowing that this was what her mother would have done, knowing as well that her mother would have forgiven her the small lie about the tea. Their ration never seemed to last, as Colin was the only one who did not drink it. With a sweep of her hand, Ellen indicated the door to the parlor and ushered the stranger in. Colin tried to slink upstairs to his room, but Ellen was having none of that. Between clenched teeth, she hissed, "You keep our guest company, Colin, while I get the drinks."

In the kitchen, Ellen leaned against the big oak table and tried to calm herself. She had to find out just what Colin had been up to — and decide what to do about it. She hoped it was something minor, something that wouldn't send her father into one of his rages that lasted for days and blighted the whole household. Ellen glanced over to the stove: the potatoes were still bubbling and the oven had reached temperature, so she could put in the

steak and kidney pie. The table was a mess, covered with flour and scraps of pastry, but with luck she could get it cleaned up before her mother came home. Ellen placed three glasses on a tray, fetched the pitcher of lemonade from the icebox, placing over it a gauze cloth weighted with blue beads to keep out flies. There! Very elegant.

In the parlor, Colin and the stranger were sitting in silence, Colin sullen and the stranger ill at ease. When Ellen came in, the young man jumped to his feet and grabbed at the tray, almost causing her to drop it. "Let me do that," he said. "There's really no need to go to any trouble. I should be on my way."

Ellen placed the tray on the table in front of the large sateen-covered sofa. "It's no trouble, really, but —" she paused, "— it seems as if Colin has been."

The stranger picked up the cue, his words tumbling out in an untidy rush. "I was coming in to land, and I saw him and his friends running across the end of the runway by the fence." He smiled ruefully. "It gave me kind of a start, made me bugger up the landing. If they'd been any farther in I could have hit them."

Ellen gasped. Her father would have a blue fit when he heard.

The young man blushed, obviously misinterpreting her reaction. "Pardon my French, that just slipped out." He gave Colin a stern look, but it was soon replaced by a grin that made him look like a mischievous schoolboy. "Not all the other pilots are as good as me!" His smile faded. "The lads could cause someone to have a prang."

Colin had the grace to look shamefaced. “I was only trying to get a closer look. I didn’t mean anything by it.”

“Colin! You promised Dad you wouldn’t go there at all. And now you’ve broken your promise and nearly caused an accident. And you could’ve got yourself killed! What were you thinking of?” Ellen couldn’t control the exasperation in her voice. “Will he get into trouble up at the base?” Her heart almost stopped at the thought of the military police turning up on the doorstep. Dad would stay angry for months.

“Nah.” The young man smiled, a shy smile. “I’m the only one who saw him. Once I collared him, I made him tell me where he lived. I reckoned it would be better if I just brought him home — let his family haul him over the coals.” His smile broadened and his eyes got a faraway look. “At his age I was mad about planes, too. I used to spend all my weekends crouched at the end of the runways at Hendon Aerodrome, back home in London.” He looked directly at Colin. “You didn’t mean any harm, did yer, kid? And you’ll never ever do it again, right?”

Colin nodded vigorously, but his hands were once again behind his back with his fingers crossed.

“Colin!” Ellen snapped, and pulled his hands forward. “This isn’t a game. You were lucky this time. The gentleman’s right. And if Dad should ever find out he’ll take his belt to you ...” Ellen’s voice trailed off as she saw a spark of genuine fear in her brother’s eyes. Colin had only ever got the belt twice — and

then only two strokes — but he’d seen Stewart and Graham get it often enough, and knew that he was old enough now to get the full works.

“Don’t tell Dad,” Colin pleaded, his voice sounding shaky.

Ellen looked at the young man. What would he think if she agreed? Did he want to see Colin punished? She sighed, “Well, if you really, truly promise, Colin, and you’ve got to mind what I say more than you do.” Ellen glanced at the airman. He wasn’t protesting, so she continued. “All right, I won’t tell this time. But just this time, mind.”

“Ellen, you’re the best.” Colin’s fear was replaced by elation. He turned to his rescuer. “I watched you landing. It was amazing, the way it came down, and then went up, and then bumped down again.” Using his hands, Colin re-enacted the plane’s aborted landing, throwing in a few sound effects for good measure.

“Terrifying, rather than amazing. I don’t think I’ve ever been so scared in my life.” The young man shook his head. “Everyone in the plane was shouting instructions at me. Thought it was going to be the end of my flying career, I can tell you. Told ’em that a raccoon had startled me.” His laugh sounded just a little too hearty as he stood up. “I’d better be going, now I’ve done what I set out to.” He looked steadily at Ellen. “You make sure that this brother of yours keeps his word. He could get himself into a real scrape if he pulls

a stunt like that again.”

Ellen stood up to usher their guest out, relieved that everything had been sorted out, and wanting to get rid of him before either of her parents came home. “Thank you,” she said. “I’ll keep him out of trouble.”

“Hey!” Colin was completely restored to good spirits. “You promised him some lemonade, Ellen, and you’ve not even offered any. It’s a long walk back to camp, you know, unless someone gives him a ride.” He turned to the airman. “While you drink it, you can tell me about flying. I’m going to be a pilot, too. I’ll fly in the war just like you and my big brother, Graham. He’s out at Trenton, going over to England soon. You’re English, aren’t you? I can tell by your accent.” Colin was fizzing with excitement. “What’s your name? You’ve not even told us that. I’m Colin Logan and this is my sister, Ellen.”

Ellen tried to glare Colin quiet, but it didn’t work. She shrugged and, raising her voice across Colin’s chatter, said, “Would you like some lemonade?”

The young man ducked his head in assent, and blushed again. “I would, actually. I’ve got quite a taste for Canadian lemonade. It’s nothing like the stuff back home.” Awkwardly, he thrust his hand at Ellen. “I’m Stephen Dearborn. Pleased to meet you.”

After shaking his hand, which felt sweaty and hot, Ellen busied herself pouring the cold drinks. There was no need for her to talk. Colin was doing enough for both of them, and Stephen was good-humoredly trying to answer the questions being fired at him.

Settling back into her chair, Ellen sipped the tart lemonade. She smiled — Barb and Deanna would be sick with envy if they could see her, entertaining a pilot in her parents’ parlor. Most of the girls in town had been uniform crazy ever since the base opened almost two years ago. The foreign trainees were thought to be the most romantic, but Ellen had to admit that she didn’t find Stephen particularly dashing. If anything, he was rather nondescript. His face was nothing special either, neither good-looking nor ugly. His only good feature as far as Ellen was concerned was his hair, which was a reddish brown and very wavy.

Ellen hadn’t really been listening to Stephen and Colin, but she tuned in as Colin started to talk about Graham again.

Stephen sat upright. “That’s who you thought I was!” he said to Ellen. “That’s why you hugged me?”

Ellen felt her cheeks heat up again. “It’s so embarrassing.”

Stephen laughed. “Here I was bringing this little tyke home and a strange girl throws herself at me.” He glanced at Ellen. “I’ll be honest — nothing like that has ever happened to me before.”

Ellen didn’t know what to say, but was saved by Colin, who launched into a long and detailed account of Graham’s flying training and how he was hoping to be sent to a fighter squadron in England.

Stephen shuddered. “He sounds brave, your brother. As far as I’m concerned, training can go on as long as it likes.” He stopped himself abruptly. Then,

realizing that both Colin and Ellen were staring at him, he said, “Did you say your dad was Scots, Colin?” Trying to sound casual, he added, “Do you still have relatives there?”

While Colin answered, Stephen’s remark turned in Ellen’s brain. What did he mean, he didn’t want his training to end? She felt a surge of anger. Here he was, safe in Canada. She remembered how eagerly her brothers had signed up, going down to Hamilton the day Canada had declared war. Stewart hadn’t even seemed to mind that his medical studies would be put on hold. He’d signed on with the army — the Royal Hamilton Light Infantry, and had been proud to do so. He wasn’t a shirker. Shirker. The word was on the tip of her tongue, when she heard the front door open and her father’s heavy footsteps in the hallway.

“Dad, Dad! Come and meet Stephen. He’s in the RAF.” Colin bounced out of the parlor and was tugging on his father’s sleeve before he even had a chance to remove his hat.

Ellen groaned inwardly. How were they going to explain Stephen’s presence?

“Pleased to meet you, Mr. Logan.” Stephen was on his feet, offering his hand to Ellen’s father. “Stephen Dearborn. Your son had a small tumble from his bike, and I brought him home. Your daughter was kind enough to offer me a cold drink before I set off back to the camp.”

Smooth, Ellen thought, very smooth. She studied her father carefully. His eyes were tired, but he forced

himself to smile. “A good Samaritan, eh, laddie? Perhaps we can return the favor. My wife will be home shortly, and she’d be after me if I didn’t ask you for supper. We have two boys in the forces, and she always hopes that other families will take care of them for us.” Mr. Logan paused, shaded his eyes with one large hand. “Though there’s little chance of that for young Stewart.” Like a dog coming out of water, he shook himself. “Ellen, before you set the table you might investigate what’s stinking up the hallway.”

Ellen leaped to her feet. The potatoes! The bloody potatoes must have burned dry!

Also by Gillian Chan

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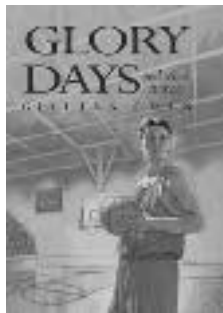
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