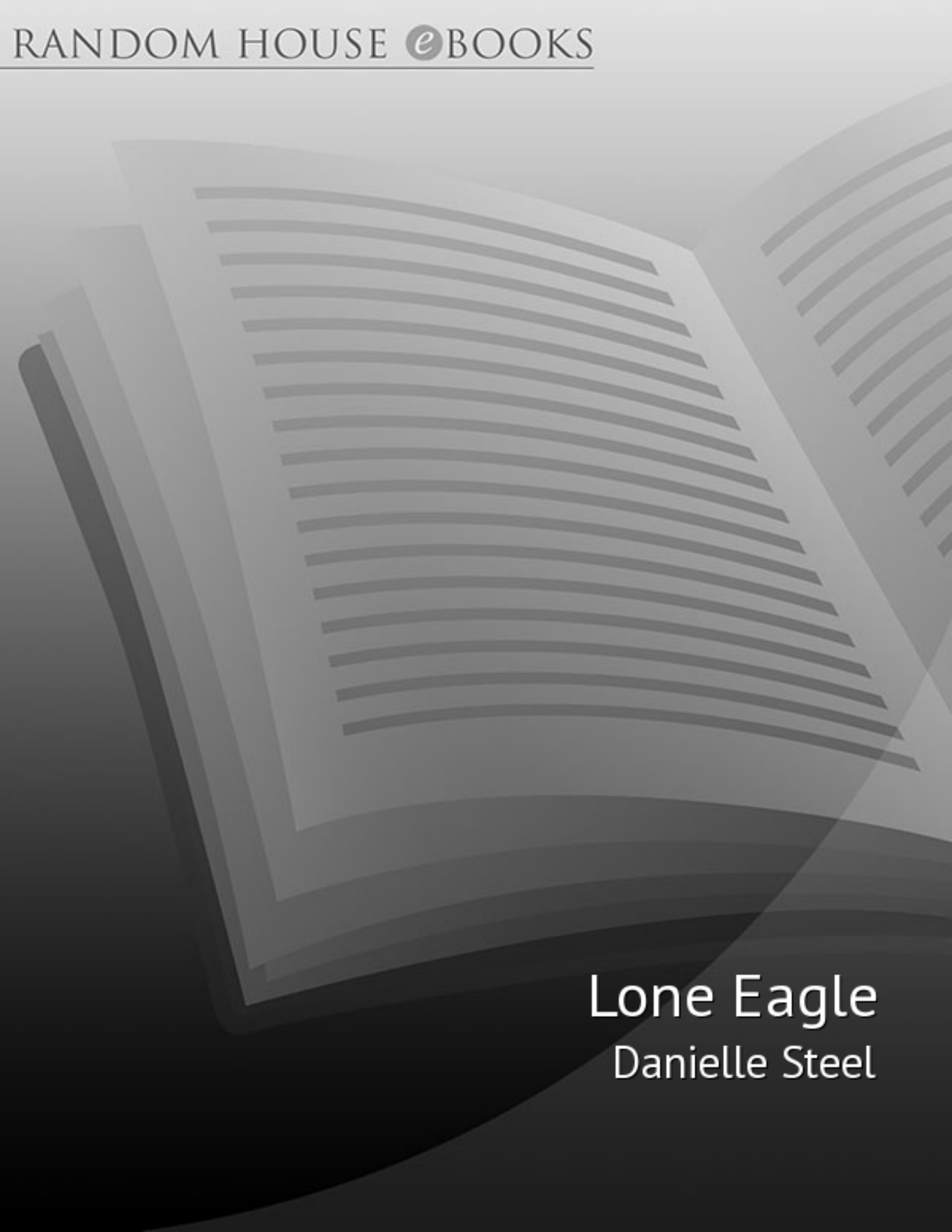


RANDOM HOUSE  BOOKS



Lone Eagle
Danielle Steel

About the Book

It takes courage to let someone you love fly free.

The phone call came on a snowy December afternoon. Kate was certain it was Joe, her soulmate since they'd met thirty-four years before - but what she got was the one call she had never wanted. It took her mind back to the moment when she and Joe first met, when she was just seventeen and he was young, powerful, dazzling and different from any man she'd ever known...

Christmas, 1940, and Kate is making her debut in New York society. Joe, the brilliant protégé of Charles Lindbergh, seems just out of Kate's reach. As the months pass, they meet again, and although Kate goes off to study at Radcliffe and Joe skyrockets to fame in modern aviation, he is always drawn back to her, as a moth to a flame. When the war is over Kate wants a marriage and family - while Joe wants the world. Unwilling to wait any longer, Kate moves on with her life. But when a chance encounter brings them together again, the time has come to make a choice, one that will have profound consequences for the rest of their lives.

A novel of extraordinary grace and compassion from a master storyteller.

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Also by Danielle Steel

Copyright

DANIELLE STEEL

LONE EAGLE

To my beloved children,
Beatrix, Trevor, Todd, Nick,
Samantha, Victoria, Vanessa,
Maxx and Zara,
You are the most wonderful
people on earth,
and the best I know,
and I love you with all my heart.

Mom

a thousand years,
a thousand fears,
a thousand tears
 we shed
 for each other,
like moth
 to flame,
a deadly game,
lost children
 looking
for their mother,
and when hearts sing,
the music brings
 magic
 like no other,
the winter cold,
no hands to hold,
the summer
 brief
 and sunny,
and in the mornings,
pressed
 close to you,
cherished moments,
tender, loving,
 funny,
we danced,
we laughed,
we flew,
we grew,
we dared,
we cared
more than any soul

could know
or reason,
light so bright,
the fit so right
for a hundred
precious
seasons,
the moth,
the flame,
the dance
the same,
then broken wings
and treasured
things
in pieces
all around us,
the dream
the only one
i long for,
here or there,
our souls
laid bare,
a million years
from now,
my heart
will
ever
hold you.

PROLOGUE

December 1974

THE CALL CAME when she least expected it, on a snowy December afternoon, almost exactly thirty-four years after they met. Thirty-four years. Extraordinary years. She had spent exactly two-thirds of her lifetime with him. Kate was fifty-one years old, and Joe was sixty-three. And in spite of everything he had accomplished, Joe still seemed and looked young to her. There was a vibrancy to him, an energy, a driving force. He was like a shooting star, trapped in the body and soul of one man, always pushing forward, skyrocketing toward unseen goals. He had vision and brilliance and excitement like no one else. She had seen it from the moment they met. Had always known it. She hadn't always understood it, but from the first, without even knowing who he was, she had known he was different and important and special, and very, very rare.

Kate had felt him in her bones. Over the years, he had become part of her soul. He was not always the most comfortable part of her, or even of himself, but he was a major part of her, and had been for a long time.

There had been clashes over the years, and explosions, peaks and valleys, mountaintops, sunrises and sunsets, and peaceful times. He had been Everest to her. The Ultimate. The place she had always wanted to reach. From the very beginning, he had been her dream. He had been Heaven and Hell, and once in a while purgatory somewhere in between. He was a genius, and a man of extremes.

They gave meaning to each other's lives, and color and depth, and had frightened each other profoundly at times.

Peace and acceptance and love had come with age and time. The lessons they had learned had been hard won and hard earned.

They had each been the other's greatest challenge, embodied each other's worst fears. And in the end, they had healed each other. In time, they fit together like two pieces of one puzzle, with no sharp edges and no seams.

In the thirty-four years they had shared, they had found something that few people ever do. It had been tumultuous and exhilarating, and the noise had been deafening at times, but they both knew that it was infinitely rare. It had been a magical dance for thirty-four years, whose steps had not been easy for either of them to learn.

Joe was different from other people, he saw what others could not, and had little need to live among other men. He was happier, in fact, when he kept to himself. And around him, he had created an extraordinary world. He was a visionary who had created an industry, an empire. He had expanded the world. And in doing so, he had stretched horizons beyond what anyone had imagined would be there. He was driven to build, to break barriers, to constantly go farther than he had before.

Joe was in California when the call came that night, and had been there for weeks. He was due back in two more days. Kate wasn't worried about him, she never worried about him anymore. He left and he returned. Like the seasons or the sun. Wherever he was, she knew that he was never far from her. All that mattered to Joe, other than Kate, were his planes. They were, and always had been, an integral part of him. He needed them, and what they meant to him, in some ways more than he needed her. She knew that, and accepted it. Like his soul or his eyes, she had come to love his planes as part of him. It was all part of the miraculous mosaic that was Joe.

She was writing in a journal that day, content in the silence of the peaceful house, as the world outside lay

blanketed by fresh snow. It was already dark when the call came at six o'clock, and she was startled by how late it was. When she glanced at her watch at the sound of the phone, she smiled, knowing it would be Joe. She looked much the same as she always had, as she pushed back a lock of dark red hair, and reached for the phone. She knew she would be met instantly by the deep velvet of the familiar voice, anxious to tell her about his day.

"Hello?" she said, anticipating his voice, as she noticed how hard it was still snowing outside. It was a perfect winter wonderland, and would make for a lovely Christmas when the children came home. Both had jobs and lives and people they cared about, of their own. Her world revolved almost entirely now around Joe. It was Joe who lived at the center of her soul.

"Mrs. Allbright?" The voice was not Joe's. She felt disappointed for a moment, but only because she had expected to hear him. He would call eventually. He always did. There was a strange, long pause, almost as though the vaguely familiar voice on the other end expected her to know why he had called. He was a new assistant but Kate had spoken to him before. "I'm calling from Mr. Allbright's office," he said, and then paused again, and without knowing why, she had an odd feeling that Joe had wanted him to call. It was as though she could sense Joe standing beside her in the room, and yet she could not imagine why this man had called her, and not Joe. "I ... I'm sorry. There's been an accident." At the sound of his words, her entire body went cold, as though she had suddenly been put out naked in the snow.

She knew before he said the words. An accident ... there's been an accident ... an accident ... it was a litany she had once spent a lifetime waiting for, and then forgotten, because Joe had had so many charmed lives. He was indestructible, infallible, invincible, immortal. He had told her when they met that he had a hundred lives, and

had only used up ninety-nine. There always seemed to be one more.

"He flew to Albuquerque this afternoon," the voice said, and suddenly all Kate could hear in the room was the sound of a clock ticking. She realized breathlessly that it was the same sound she had heard more than forty years before when her mother came to tell her about her father. It was the sound of time running out, the feeling of falling through space into a bottomless abyss, and she knew she could not ever let herself go back to that place again. Joe would not let this happen to her. "He was testing a new design." The voice went on, sounding like a boy to her suddenly. Why wasn't it Joe on the line? For the first time in years, she felt the hands of terror claw at her. "There was an explosion," he said in a voice so soft she couldn't bear to hear it. The word hit her like a bomb.

"No ... I ... there couldn't have been ... there can't be ..."

She choked on her words, and then froze. She knew the rest before he could say it to her. He no longer had to tell her. She knew what had happened as she could sense the walls of her safe, protected world falling around her. "Don't tell me." They both sat there for a long moment, terrified into silence, as tears filled her eyes. He had volunteered to call her. No one else could bring themselves to pick up the phone.

"They crashed over the desert," he said simply, as Kate closed her eyes and sat there, listening. It hadn't happened. It wasn't happening. He wouldn't do this to her. And yet she had always known it could happen. But neither of them had ever really believed it would. He was too young for this to happen to him. And she was far too young to be his widow. And yet there had been so many others like her in his life, wives of pilots who lost their men testing his planes. Joe had always gone to visit them. And now this boy was calling her, this child, how could he possibly know what Joe had been to her, or she to him? How could he even

know who or what Joe was? All he knew was the man who had built the empire. The legend he had been. There was so much more to Joe that he would never know. She had spent half a lifetime learning who Joe was.

“Did someone check the wreckage?” she asked in a voice that trembled beyond her control. Surely, if they did, they would find him, and he would be laughing at them, dust himself off, and call to tell her what had happened. Nothing could ever touch Joe.

The young man on the phone did not want to say that there had been a midair explosion that had lit up the sky like a volcano. Another pilot flying well above him said it had looked like Hiroshima. There was nothing left of Joe but his name.

“We’re sure, Mrs. Allbright ... I’m so sorry. Is there anything I can do for you? Is there anyone there with you?”

She paused, unable to form words. All she wanted to say was that Joe was there with her, and always would be. She knew that nothing and no one could take him from her.

“Someone from the office will call you later, about the ... uh ... arrangements,” the voice said awkwardly, and all Kate could do was nod. And without another word, she hung up. There was nothing left to say to him, nothing she had to say, or could. She stared out at the snow, seeing Joe. It was as though he were standing right in front of her, just as he had always been. She could still see him the way he had looked the night they met, so long ago.

She could feel panic wash over her, and knew she had to be strong now for him, she had to be the person she had become because of him. He would expect that of her. She could not allow herself to fall into the darkness again, or give in to the terror that loving him had healed. She closed her eyes and said his name softly in the familiar room they had shared.

“Joe ... don’t go ... I need you ...,” she whispered as tears rolled down her cheeks.

"I'm right here, Kate. I'm not going anywhere. You know that." The voice was strong and quiet, and so real that she knew she had heard him. He would not leave her. He was doing what he had to do, where he had to be, where he wanted to be, in his own skies somewhere. As he was meant to be. Just as he had been in all her years of loving him. Powerful. Invincible. And free.

Nothing could change that now. No explosion could claim him from her. He was bigger than that. Too big to die. She had to free him once again, to do what he was destined to do. It was to be her final act of courage, and his.

A life without Joe was unimaginable, unthinkable. As she looked out into the night, she could see him slowly walking away from her. And then he turned to smile at her. He was the same man he had always been. The same man she had loved for so long. Just as he was.

The house filled with an immeasurable silence, as Kate sat long into the night, thinking of him. Outside, the snow continued to fall as her mind drifted back to the night they had met. She had been seventeen, and he had been young and powerful and dazzling. It had been an unforgettable moment that had changed her life, as she looked at him, and the dance began.

1

KATE JAMISON SAW Joe for the first time at a debutante ball in December of 1940, three days before Christmas. She and her parents had come to New York for the week from Boston, to do some Christmas shopping, visit friends, and attend the ball. Kate was actually a friend of the debutante's younger sister. At seventeen it was unusual for girls to be included, but Kate had dazzled everyone for so long, and was so mature for her age, that their hosts had found it an easy decision to include her.

Kate's friend had been jubilant, as had she. It was the most beautiful party she'd ever been to, and the room, when she walked in on her father's arm, had been filled with extraordinary people. Heads of state were there, important political figures, dowagers and matrons, and enough handsome young men to flesh out an army. Every important name in New York society was in attendance, and several from Philadelphia and Boston. There were seven hundred people chatting in the elegant reception rooms and an exquisite mirrored ballroom, and the gardens had been tented. There were hundreds of liveried waiters serving them, a band in both the ballroom and the tent outside. There were beautiful women and handsome men, extraordinary jewels and gowns, and the gentlemen were wearing white tie. The guest of honor was a pretty girl, she was small and blond and she was wearing a dress made for her by Schiaparelli. This was the moment she had looked forward to for her entire lifetime; she was being officially presented to society for the first time. She looked like a

porcelain doll as she stood on the reception line with her parents, and a crier announced each guest's name as they entered in their evening gowns and tails.

As the Jamisons came through the line, Kate kissed her friend and thanked her for inviting her. It was the first ball of its kind she had been to, and for an instant the two young women looked like a Degas portrait of two ballerinas, as they stood in subtle contrast to each other. The debutante was small and fair, with gently rounded curves, while Kate's looks were more striking. She was tall and slim, with dark reddish auburn hair that hung smoothly to her shoulders. She had creamy skin, enormous dark blue eyes, and a perfect figure. And while the debutante was restrained and serene, greeting each guest, there was an electricity and energy that seemed to emanate from Kate. As she was introduced to the guests by her parents, she met their eyes squarely, and dazzled them with her smile. There was something about the way she looked, and even the shape of her mouth that suggested she was about to say something funny, something important, something that you would want to hear, and remember. Everything about Kate promised excitement, as though her own youth was so exuberant that she had to share it with you.

There was something mesmerizing about Kate, always had been, as though she came from a different place and was destined for greatness. There was nothing ordinary about Kate, she stood out in every crowd, not only for her looks, but for her wit and charm. At home, she had always been full of mischief and wild plans, and as an only child she had kept her parents amused and entertained. She had been born to them late in life, after twenty years of marriage, and when she was a baby, her father liked to say that she had been well worth waiting for, and her mother readily agreed. They adored her. In her earliest years, she had been the center of their world.

Kate's early years were easy and free. Born into wealth, as a small child she had known nothing but comfort and ease. Her father, John Barrett, had been the scion of an illustrious Boston family, and he had married Elizabeth Palmer, whose fortune was even larger than his own. Their families had been immensely pleased with the match. Kate's father had been well known in banking circles, for his good judgment and wise investments. And then the crash came in '29, and swept away Kate's father and thousands like him on a tidal wave of destruction, despair, and loss. Fortunately, Elizabeth's family had felt it unwise to let the pair commingle their fortunes. There had been no children between them for a long time, and Elizabeth's own family continued to handle most of her financial affairs. Miraculously, she was relatively untouched by the crash.

John Barrett lost his entire fortune, and only a very small part of hers. Elizabeth had done everything she could to reassure him, and to help him get on his feet again. But the disgrace he felt ate away at his very foundations. Three of his most important clients and best friends shot themselves within months of losing their fortunes, and it took another two years for John to give way to despair himself. Kate scarcely saw him during those two years. He had closeted himself in an upstairs bedroom, seldom saw anyone, and rarely went out. The bank his family had established, and which he had run for nearly twenty years, closed within two months of the crash. He became inaccessible, removed, reclusive, and the only thing that ever cheered him was the sight of Kate, who was only six then, wandering into his rooms, bringing him a piece of candy or a drawing she had made for him. As though sensing the maze he was lost in, she instinctively tried to lure him out again, to no avail. Eventually, even she found his door locked to her, and in time her mother forbade her to go upstairs. Elizabeth didn't want her to see her father, drunk, disheveled,

unshaven, often sleeping the days away. It was a sight that would have terrified her, and broke her mother's heart.

John Barrett took his life almost two years after the crash, in September 1931. He was the only surviving member of his family at the time, and left behind him only his widow and one child. Elizabeth's fortune was still intact then, she was one of the few lucky ones in her world whose life had been relatively unaffected by the crash, until she lost John.

Kate still remembered the exact moment when her mother had told her. She had been sitting in the nursery drinking a cup of hot chocolate, holding her favorite doll, and when she saw her mother walk into the room, she knew something terrible had happened. All she could see were her mother's eyes, and all she could hear was the suddenly-too-loud ticking of the nursery clock. Her mother didn't cry when she told her, she told her quietly and simply that Kate's father had gone to Heaven to live with God. She said that he had been very sad in the past two years, and he would be happy now with God. As her mother said the words, Kate felt as though her entire world had collapsed on top of her. She could barely breathe, as the cocoa spilled from her hands, and she dropped her doll. She knew that from that moment on, her life would never be the same again.

Kate stood solemnly at her father's funeral, and she heard nothing. All she could remember then was that her father had left them because he had been too sad. Other people's words swirled around her afterward ... heartbroken ... never recovered ... shot himself ... lost several fortunes ... good thing he hadn't handled Elizabeth's money as well Outwardly, nothing changed for them after that, they lived in the same house, saw the same people. Kate still went to the same school, and within days after his death, she started third grade.

She felt as though she were in a daze for months afterward. The man she had so trusted and loved and looked up to, and who had so clearly adored her, had left them, without warning or explanation or any reason that Kate could fathom. All she knew and could understand was that he was gone, and in all the profound ways that truly mattered, her life was forever changed. A major piece of her world had disappeared. And her mother was so distraught for the first few months that she all but disappeared from Kate's life. Kate felt as though she had lost two parents, not just one.

Elizabeth settled what was left of John's estate with their close friend and banker Clarke Jamison. Like Elizabeth, his fortune and investments had survived the crash. He was quiet and kind and solid. His own wife had died years before of tuberculosis, he had no children of his own, and had never remarried. But within nine months of John Barrett's death, he asked Elizabeth to marry him. They were married fourteen months after John's death, in a small, private ceremony that included only themselves, the minister, and Kate, who watched with wide, solemn eyes. She was nine at the time.

Over the years, it had proven to be a wise decision. Although she wouldn't have admitted it publicly, out of respect for her late husband, Elizabeth was even happier with Clarke than she had been with John. They were well suited, shared similar interests, and Clarke was not only a good husband to her, but a wonderful father to Kate. Clarke adored Kate, and she him. He worshiped her, protected her, and although they never talked about him, he spent all the ensuing years trying to make up to her for the father she had lost. Clarke was quiet and solid and loving, and took pleasure in the spirit of joy and mischief that eventually rekindled in Kate. And after discussing it with both Elizabeth and Kate, he adopted her when she was ten. At first, Kate had worried that it would be disrespectful to her

father, but she confessed to Clarke the morning of the adoption that it was what she wanted most in the world. Her father had slipped quietly out of her life at the moment his own troubles began, when she was six. Clarke provided all the emotional stability Kate had needed after her father's death. There was nothing he denied her, and he was always there for her in every imaginable way.

Eventually, all her friends seemed to forget he wasn't her father, and in time, so did Kate. She thought of her own father quietly sometimes, in rare, solemn moments, but he seemed so far away now that she scarcely remembered him. All she remembered now, when she allowed herself to, was the sense of terror and abandonment she had felt when he died. But she seldom, if ever, allowed herself to think of it. The door to that part of her was closed, and she preferred it that way.

It wasn't Kate's nature to dwell on the past, or cling to sadness. She was the sort of person who always seemed to be propelled toward joy, and created it for others wherever she went. The sound of her laughter, and spark of excitement in her eyes, created an aura of joy wherever she went, much to Clarke's delight. They never spoke of the fact that Clarke had adopted her. It was a closed chapter in Kate's life, and she would have been shocked if anyone had spoken of it to her. Clarke's fathering of her over the past nine years since her father's death, had become part of her so seamlessly that she no longer even thought about it. He was truly her father now in heart and soul, not only in her mind, but his own. In every possible way, she had long since become his child.

Clarke Jamison was a much-admired banker in Boston. He came from a respectable family, had gone to Harvard, and was more than content with his life. He had always been happy that he'd married Elizabeth and adopted Kate. In all the ways that mattered to him, and to them, his life was a success. And certainly in the eyes of the world as

well. Kate's mother Elizabeth was a happy woman. She had everything she wanted in life, a husband she loved, and a daughter she adored. Kate had appeared in her parents' lives, just after Elizabeth's fortieth birthday. It had been the greatest joy of her life. All her hopes rested on Kate, she wanted everything wonderful for her. And despite Kate's energy and exuberant personality, Elizabeth had seen to it that she had both impeccable manners and astounding poise. And once she had married Clarke, after the trauma of John's suicide, Elizabeth and Clarke had treated Kate like a small adult. They shared their lives with her, and traveled extensively abroad. They always took her along.

At seventeen, Kate had been to Europe with them every summer, and they had taken her to Singapore and Hong Kong with them the year before. She had been exposed to far more than most girls her age, and as she glided among the guests seeming more like an adult than a young girl, she was enormously composed. It was something one noticed instantly about her. One knew immediately that Kate was not only happy, but totally at ease in her own skin. She could speak to anyone, go anywhere, do almost anything. Nothing daunted or frightened Kate. She was excited by life, and it showed.

The gown Kate was wearing to the debutante ball in New York had been ordered for her from Paris the previous spring. It was entirely different from the gowns the other girls were wearing. Most of them were wearing ball gowns in pastel or bright colors. No one else had worn white, of course, in deference to the guest of honor. And they all looked lovely. But Kate looked more than that, she was elegant and striking. Even at seventeen, everything about her said she was a woman and not a girl. Not in an offensive way, but she seemed to exude a kind of quiet sophistication. There were no frills, no big skirt, no ruffles or flounces. The ice blue satin gown was cut on the bias, and seemed to ripple over her like water, it was almost a

second skin, and the straps that held it to her shoulders were barely stronger than threads. It showed off her perfect figure, and the aquamarine and diamond earrings she wore were her mother's and had been her grandmother's before her. They sparkled as they danced in and out of her long dark red hair. She wore almost no makeup, just a little powder. Her dress was the color of an icy winter sky, and her skin had the color and softness of the palest creamy rose. Her lips were bright red and caught your eye as she constantly laughed and smiled.

Her father was teasing her as they left the reception line, and she was laughing with him, with a graceful white-gloved hand tucked into his arm. Her mother was right behind them and seemed to stop every five seconds to chat with friends. Within a few minutes, Kate had spotted the sister of the debutante who had invited her to the party, standing amidst a group of young people, and Kate abandoned her father to meet them. They promised to meet up again in the ballroom later, and Clarke Jamison watched his daughter with pride, as she approached the group of handsome young people, and unbeknownst to Kate, all heads turned. She was a stunning girl. Within seconds, he could see them all laughing and talking, and all the boys looking bowled over by her. Wherever she was, whatever she did, he never worried about Kate. Everyone loved her, and was instantly drawn to her. What Elizabeth wanted for Kate was to find a suitable young man and get married, in the next few years.

Elizabeth had been happy with Clarke for nearly ten years and wanted the same fate for her daughter. But Clarke had been insistent. He wanted Kate to get an education first, and it had been easy to convince her. She was too bright not to take advantage of that fact, although he didn't expect her to work once she got out of school. But he thought she should have every possible advantage, and was sure it would serve her well. She had been applying to

colleges all that winter, and would go to college the following year, when she would be eighteen. She was excited about it, and had applied to Wellesley, Radcliffe, Vassar, Barnard, and a handful of others that appealed less to her. And because of her father's history at Harvard, Radcliffe was her first choice. In every possible way, her father was proud of her.

Kate drifted with the others from the reception rooms to the ballroom. She chatted with the young girls she knew, and was introduced to dozens of young men. She seemed perfectly at ease talking to either women or men, and there seemed to be a score of the latter trailing behind her every step of the way. They found her stories amusing, her style exciting, and when the dancing started, they cut in on each other constantly. She never seemed to finish a dance with the same man she had started out with. It was a glittering evening, and she was having great fun. And as always, the attention she got didn't go to her head. She enjoyed it but was very self-contained.

Kate was standing at the buffet when she first saw him, she had been chatting with a young woman who had started Wellesley that year and was telling her all about it. She had been listening intently, when she looked up and found herself staring at him. She didn't know why, but there was something mesmerizing about him. He was noticeably tall, had broad shoulders, sandy blond hair, and a chiseled face. And he was considerably older than the boys who had been dancing attendance on her. She suspected he was in his late twenties as she stopped listening to the girl from Wellesley entirely, and watched Joe Allbright with fascination as he put two lamb chops on a plate. He was wearing white tie like the other men, and he looked strikingly handsome, but there was something uncomfortable about the way he looked, and everything about him suggested that he would rather have been somewhere else. As she watched him make his way along

the buffet, he seemed almost awkward, like a giant bird whose wings had unexpectedly been clipped, and all he wanted was to fly away.

He was only inches from her finally, as he held a half-full plate, and he sensed her watching him. Looking down at her from his great height, with a serious air, their eyes met. He stopped moving for a minute, as they watched each other, and when she smiled at him, he almost forgot he was holding the plate. He had never seen anyone like her, as beautiful or as vibrant. There was something fascinating about her, like standing next to something very bright at very close range, or looking into a very bright light. Within seconds, he had to look away. He lowered his eyes, but he didn't move away from her. He found he couldn't move at all, he was riveted to where he stood, and in an instant he looked at her again.

"That doesn't seem like enough dinner for a man your size," she said, smiling at him. She wasn't shy, and he liked that. He had found it difficult to speak to people ever since he'd been a boy. And as an adult, he was a man of few words.

"I had dinner before I came," he explained. He had stayed away from the caviar table, had avoided the vast variety of oysters that had been brought in for the occasion, and had been satisfied with the two lamb chops, a roll and butter, and a few shrimp. It was enough for him. And she could see even in his tailcoat that he was very slim. It didn't fit him as perfectly as it should have, and she suspected correctly that it had been borrowed for the occasion. It was an article of clothing he had never needed in his wardrobe, and he did not expect to wear it again. He had borrowed it from a friend. He had done his best to get out of coming by saying that he didn't have a set of tails. And then had felt obligated to come when his friend had gotten them for him. But with the exception of his brief

encounter with Kate, he would have given almost anything not to be there.

"You don't look very happy to be here," she said only loud enough for him to hear. She said it with a gentle smile and a sympathetic air, and he grinned, admiring her.

"How did you guess?"

"You looked like you wanted to hide your plate somewhere and run away. Do you hate parties?" she asked, chatting with him easily, as the girl from Wellesley got distracted by someone else and drifted away. They seemed to be standing alone in the midst of hundreds of people eddying all around them, and they were oblivious to everyone else.

"Yes, I do. Or I think I do. I've never been to one like this." He had to admit, he was impressed.

"Neither have I," she said honestly, but in her case it was not due to preference or lack of opportunity, but to age. But there was no way Joe could have known. She looked so relaxed and was so mature that if someone had asked, he would have guessed her to be somewhere in her early twenties and closer to his age. "It's pretty, isn't it?" she said, glancing around and then back at him. And he smiled, it was, but he hadn't thought of it that way. All he had been thinking of since he arrived was how many people were there, how hot and crowded it was, and how many other things he would have preferred doing. And now, looking at her, he wasn't as sure the party was the total waste of time he had deemed it to be at first.

"It is pretty," he said, as she noticed the color of his eyes. They were the same as hers, they were a dark almost sapphire blue. "And so are you," he said unexpectedly. There was something so direct about the compliment he had paid her, and the way he looked, that it meant more to her than all the elegant words of the dozens of young men who had been paying court to her. And although visibly ten years younger, they were far more socially adept than he.

"You have beautiful eyes," he said, fascinated by them. They were so clear and so open and so alive, and so brave. She looked as though she were afraid of nothing. They had that in common, but in very different ways. If anything, this evening was one of the few things that had frightened him. He would rather have risked his life, which he did often, than tackle a group like this. He had been there for less than an hour when he met her, and the party had already worn thin for him, and he was hoping to leave soon. He was waiting for his friend to tell him they could leave.

"Thank you. I'm Kate Jamison." She introduced herself, as he shifted his plate to the other hand, and extended his right hand to her.

"Joe Allbright. Do you want some food?" He was direct and clear, and spare in what he said. He only said what he felt he needed to. He had never been one for flowery words. And she had not yet taken a plate at the buffet. As she nodded, he handed one to her. She took very little, some vegetables, and a small piece of chicken. She wasn't hungry, she'd been too excited all night to eat. Without saying a word, he carried her plate for her, and they walked to one of the tables where the others were dining, and found two seats. They sat down in silence, and as he picked up his fork, he looked at her, wondering why she had befriended him. Whatever the reason, it had improved his evening immeasurably. And hers.

"Do you know a lot of the people here?" he asked, without glancing at them, only at her. She was picking at her food, as she smiled at him.

"Some. My parents know more than I do," she explained, surprised by how uncomfortable she felt with him. It was unusual for her, but it felt as though everything she said counted, and as if he were listening to every inflection in her voice. Being with him didn't have the light, easy feeling that she had with other men. There was something startlingly intense about him. With Joe, it was as though all

the frills and subterfuge were stripped away, and what you were left with was very real.

"Are your parents here tonight?" He seemed interested as he ate one of the shrimp.

"Yes. Somewhere. I haven't seen them in hours." And she knew she wouldn't for several more. Her mother had a way of settling into corners with a few close friends, and whiling away the evening, without even dancing. And Kate's father always stayed close to her. "We came down from Boston for the party," she offered to further the conversation, and he nodded.

"Is that where you live?" he asked, eyeing her carefully. There was something about her that mesmerized him. He wasn't sure if it was the way she spoke, or the way she looked at him. She looked calm and intelligent, and interested in what he was saying. He wasn't comfortable with people paying such close attention to him. And beyond her obvious intelligence and poise, she was exquisite looking. He loved just looking at her.

"Yes. Are you from New York?" she asked, abandoning her chicken. She wasn't hungry, the evening was too exciting to be bothered with eating. She'd rather talk to him.

"Originally, no. I'm from Minnesota. I've been living here for the past year. But I've lived all over the place. New Jersey. Chicago. I spent two years in Germany. I'm going out to California after the first of the year. I go wherever there's an airstrip." He seemed to expect her to understand that, and she looked at him with increased interest.

"Do you fly?" For the first time, he looked genuinely amused by her question, and he seemed to relax visibly as he answered her.

"I guess you could say that. Have you ever been up in a plane, Kate?" It was the first time he had said her name, and she liked the way it sounded. He made it seem personal, and she was pleased that he had remembered. He

looked like the sort of man who would forget names with very little effort, and anything else that didn't hold his interest. But he was fascinated by her and had noticed everything about her even before they met.

"We flew to California last year, to take the ship to Hong Kong. Usually, we travel by train, or ship."

"It sounds like you've done some traveling. What took you to Hong Kong?"

"I went with my parents. We went to Hong Kong and Singapore, but up till then we'd just gone to Europe." Her mother had seen to it that she spoke Italian and French, and a smattering of German. Her parents thought it would be useful for her. Her father could easily imagine her married to a diplomat. She would have been the perfect ambassador's wife, and unconsciously he was grooming her for it. "Are you a pilot?" she asked, with wide eyes, which betrayed her youth for once. And he smiled again.

"Yes, I am."

"For an airline?" She thought him both mysterious and interesting, and watched as he unwound his long limbs, and sat back in his chair for a moment. He was like no one else she had ever met, and she wanted to know more about him. He had none of the obvious polish of the boys she knew, and at the same time there was something enormously worldly about him. And for all his shyness, she could sense a deep sense of confidence about him, as though he knew he could take care of himself anywhere, at any time, in any circumstance. There was an underlying innate sophistication about him, and she could easily imagine him flying an airplane. To her, it seemed very romantic and powerful.

"No, I don't fly for an airline," he explained. "I test planes, and design them, for high speed and endurance." It was more complicated than that, but it was all he needed to tell her.

“Have you ever met Charles Lindbergh?” she asked with interest. Joe didn’t tell her he was wearing his tails, and had come to the party with him, although his mentor had been reluctant to come too. Anne was at home, caring for a sick baby. Joe had lost Charles in the crowd at the beginning of the party. Joe suspected he had gone to hide himself away somewhere. Charles hated parties and crowds, but had promised Anne he would go. And in her absence, had invited Joe for moral support.

“I have. We’ve done some work together. We did some flying in Germany while I was there.” He was why Joe was in New York now, and had arranged for Joe’s work in California. Charles Lindbergh was his mentor and friend. They had met on an airstrip in Illinois years before, it was at the height of Lindbergh’s fame, and Joe had been just a kid then. But in flying circles now, Joe was nearly as well known as Charles. He just wasn’t as well known to the public or as openly acclaimed. But Joe had been breaking records consistently in recent years, and some flying buffs thought that Joe was an even better pilot. Lindbergh had said it himself once, it had been the high point of Joe’s life until that moment, and even since then. The two men had great admiration for each other, and were friends.

“He must be a very interesting man ... and I hear she’s very nice too. That was such an awful thing that happened to their baby.”

“They have a number of other children,” Joe said, wanting to dispel the potential emotion of the moment, but Kate was startled by the comment. To her, that didn’t seem as though it would make a difference. She couldn’t imagine the horror it must have been for them. She had been nine years old when it happened, and she still remembered her mother crying at the news and explaining it to her. It had sounded terrifying to Kate, and still did, and she felt very sorry for them. To her, the agony of it seemed to outweigh

even his accomplishments, and it intrigued her that this man actually knew them.

"He must be an amazing man," Kate said simply and Joe nodded. There was nothing he could add to the adulation the world had for Lindbergh, and as far as Joe was concerned, he deserved it. "What do you think of the war in Europe?" Kate asked Joe then, and he grew pensive. They both knew that the draft had been voted in by Congress nearly two months before, and the implications of that could not be ignored.

"Dangerous. I think it will get out of hand if it doesn't end soon. And I think we're going to be in it before we know it." The Blitz had begun in August with nightly bombing raids over England. The RAF had been bombing Germany since July. He had been to England to consult on the speed and efficacy of their planes, and he knew how vital their air force was going to be to their survival. Thousands of civilians had already died. But Kate was quick to disagree with him, which intrigued him. She was definitely a woman with her own opinions, and a strong mind.

"President Roosevelt says we're not going to get involved," she said firmly. She believed him, as did her parents.

"With the draft already in place, do you believe that? Don't believe everything you read. I don't think we'll have a choice sooner or later." He had thought of volunteering for the RAF, but the work he was doing with Charles was more important for the future of American aviation, particularly if the U.S. got into the war. He thought it was vital for him to be home now, and Charles had agreed with him when they discussed it. It was why Joe was going to California. Lindbergh was afraid that England could not hold out against the Germans, and he and Joe wanted to do all they could to prepare the U.S. to help if they entered the war, although Lindbergh was violently opposed to the U.S. joining the war.