

WHEN  
WE  
FALL

CAROLYN KIRBY



**NO EXIT PRESS**

This edition published in 2021,  
first published in 2020 by No Exit Press,  
an imprint of Oldcastle Books Ltd,  
Harpenden, UK  
noexit.co.uk

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A CIP catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

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ISBN

978-0-85730-397-4 (print)

978-0-85730-396-7 (epub)

2 4 6 8 10 9 7 5 3 1

Typeset in 10.5pt Minion Pro  
by Avocet Typeset, Bideford, Devon, EX39 2BP  
Printed and bound by CPI Group (UK) Ltd, Croydon, CRO 4YY

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*'Scores of senior Polish figures including President Kaczyński have died in a plane crash in Russia.*

*Polish and Russian officials said that no one survived after the plane hit trees as it approached Smolensk airport in thick fog.*

*Poland's army chief, central bank governor, MPs and leading historians were among at least 90 passengers who died.*

*Prime Minister Donald Tusk said that the crash was the most tragic event in the country's post-war history.*

*The Polish delegation was flying from Warsaw to mark the 70<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Katyn massacre of more than 20,000 Polish officers by Soviet forces during the Second World War...'*

**BBC News**  
**10 April 2010**



**10 April 2010**

**Air**



## Bournemouth, England

Saturday 10 April 2010



The radio-voice stumbles over the names of the dead. Foreign syllables are tripping her up, like bodies strewn through wreckage. And at the sound of one of the mispronounced surnames my heart buckles. Did she just mention you? But, no. A lifetime has passed since I last heard anyone say your name. Then the announcer utters a Russian word without hesitation. *Katyn*. The place in the forest. A sick-taste of guilt rises and I flick the off-switch.

Outside through the kitchen window, high cloud films the sky like a girl's well-brushed hair. Those gauzy cirrus clouds are so far away from us that their turbulence seems slight. But if you take your eyes off them for more than a moment, their icy formations will have altered forever.

You told me this as we stood on a wide grassy airfield that morning you first took me up. *Look!* you said, your rolled shirt sleeve falling back as you pointed at the clouds, *they are moving faster than anything in the sky*. In a leather flying-helmet and men's slacks, I tapped sceptical fingers on my forearm. *I don't believe you*, I said, *they're not moving at all*. Your grin was still boyish as you squinted into the sunlight. *All right then. Let me take you for a closer look*.

And so you did. Up, up went the old bi-plane in a climb so fast and so vertical that it could not last. At the top of the loop, the engine slowed then coughed into silence. We sat suspended in air. Then we began to fall; slowly at first, then faster, faster, into a gut-churning plunge. I forced my eyes to stay open. A farmhouse loomed below, white sheets waving on a washing line. *Hang on,*



## WHEN WE FALL

I thought, *maybe this isn't a joke*. The white sheets grew, filling my goggles. I pictured myself slamming into the farmhouse's orange roof, saw white lilies on my coffin and tears rolling into my father's moustache. But then, when there was nowhere left to fall, the engine hiccupped and the plane, as you knew it would, swooped back up into the crisp air.

You had to help me out of the open cockpit. I couldn't walk. *Did you not like it?* you asked, smirking. *Quite a thrill, I suppose*, I replied, cool as you like.

You raised an eyebrow, fixing me with your pale blue stare. *Then I'll have to think of something even more exciting*. My gaze, always bold, did not waver from yours. And I let my fingertip rise to touch the V of tanned skin inside your unbuttoned collar.

No photograph of you exists anywhere on the planet. I used to think that I could not bear to stay on earth either unless I could see, just once more, your face squinting up at cirrus clouds. But here, implausibly, I still am. Along with the only relic of you that remains.

I drag the chair from the kitchen table and climb somehow on to the seat. But even on tip-toes, I seem no longer able to reach the back of the top cupboard. My fingers pat around unseen knick-knacks and forgotten paperwork; a tight wad of thirty-year-old tax records for The South Coast School of English; the crinkle of an aerogram with a West German stamp. My ring taps against the smooth glass curves of a lighthouse filled with multi-coloured sand. Mine is not much of a wedding ring; the plain copper is dull and worn, and it is on the wrong hand. But it tells me, even if it lies, that you loved me more than the foreign girl.

Reaching into the sandwich of paper, I edge my thumb and forefinger around the logbook and gain some purchase on the grainy cover. Inside, your writing still bounds across the page, through flying times and aircraft types, with such youthful elegance it is as good as a portrait of your face.

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I pull harder and the logbook slides forward. Then suddenly it pops free. The release uncorks a shower of long-paid bills and unanswered letters that rocks me back on to my heels. And then forward. Slowly at first, but inescapably, I lose my connection to the chair and start to fall. I become as free and untethered from the earth as that girl in the bi-plane, although this time the ground hits me and with a force that could have come from a thousand feet instead of two.

Tiles are cool under my cheek. Black spots dance across my eyes. Then the spots start swelling, joining, almost blotting out the paperwork that is scattered across the kitchen floor. But, just before blackness closes in, something glints at me through broken glass and sherbet sand. For there, on the faded blue cover of a Royal Air Force logbook, are your initials, *SB*, in still-shining gold.