

THE MAGAZINE OF

Fantasy and Science Fiction

VOLUME I, No. 5

DECEMBER, 1950

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The Magazine of Fantasy and Science Fiction, Volume I, No. 5, DEC. 1950. Published bimonthly by Fantasy House, Inc., at 35¢ a copy. Annual subscription, \$2.00 in U. S. and possessions, Canada and in the countries of the Pan American Union; \$2.50 in all other countries. Publication office, Concord, N. H. Business and General offices, 570 Lexington Avenue, New York 22, N. Y. Editorial office, 2643 Dana St., Berkeley 4, Calif. Entered as second class matter, Oct. 13, 1949, at the Post Office at Concord, N. H. under the Act of March 3, 1879. Printed in U. S. A. Copyright, 1950, by Fantasy House, Inc. All rights, including translation into other languages, reserved. Submissions must be accompanied by stamped, self-addressed envelopes; the Publisher assumes no responsibility for return of unsolicited manuscripts.

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The wanderer always learns that man dominates nothing of what he thinks to rule. The seafarers of old knew that there was no height and no depth, no vastness from the Gates of Hercules to Ultima Thule in which man could be alone; and the spacemen of the future will know that the void of space is empty only to scientific instruments. Today's airmen come back from missions with knowledge not readily shared with the wingless; but we're fortunate that Herb Paul, at once a colonel in the Air Force and a skillful writer, has chosen to reveal a little of that knowledge in this charming and touching romance.

The Angel with Purple Hair

by HERB PAUL

IT WAS between the dark and the daylight, when the folks up about Fifty-fifth and Fifth are accustomed to stir about in a spirit of restlessness, and she came walking into the dim-lit hush-plush of the Mabuhay Club, slim and lovely in a clinging business of gold lamé, and she whipped the ghost of a smile over Craig Gordon's new dinner jacket with its fresh carnation. Then she expertly folded her wings and slid gracefully into the upholstered corner where Craig puts strangers whom he hasn't quite sized up, and as her beautiful head went by the carnation Craig could see that her hair was a pale purple and he could smell that it smelled of dew on spring roses. She smiled up at him, gently, and then he decided to take a breath.

"Good evening . . ." he said. The 'Madame' stuck in his throat and stayed there.

"Good evening, Mr. Gordon." The voice was low as a whisper, and he thought of an Aeolian harp. He hadn't in years.

The crest of one great white wing stirred restlessly behind her shoulder and she frowned ever so slightly. Gordon stepped nervously back and swallowed and remembered to take another breath. He was staring at the wing in terrible fascination.

"Mr. Gordon," she murmured.

He leaned forward attentively.

"Your — your — Highness?" he stammered. It was the only thing to say. He smiled proudly, and a little foolishly.

"You have got the table on my left wing tip," she said.

He dove to his knees cracking his head smartly on the table in passing. One broad white tip-feather was crushed beneath the gate leg of the table. He heaved frantically at the heavy base and as it gave, the wing tip lifted, stirred for a moment, and came to rest beside the golden slipper heel. Gordon straightened up hurriedly, cracking his head again.

"Damn!" he said. Immediately he was sorry.

"Poor Mr. Gordon!"

She touched his forehead with slim, tanned fingers. He stayed there. Craig Gordon was, and is, a highly intelligent man.

"Thank you so much, Mr. Gordon," she smiled, and then he got up slowly and straightened his jacket. "Now, if you don't mind I'll not bother to order just yet. You see, I'm waiting for a friend. He'll be here in three minutes."

The right wing stirred and the slim fingers stroked it into quiescence. Gordon didn't move. He couldn't.

"Thank you, Mr. Gordon."

"I'm so very, very sorry . . ." he began, bowing and backing away.

"It was nothing. They do get in the way sometimes!" Again the quick smile, and again that harp in the wind.

Craig Gordon turned away and walked slowly back to his post at the gilded doors. George, the doorman, resplendent in maroon and gold, his nose flattened against the plate glass, was frantically waggling his white gloves. Eloquently Craig frowned. The nose unflattened reluctantly, but the heavy glass door swung open a crack.

"Boss! Wot'n hell is *that*!" A hoarse, reaching whisper.

Gordon stepped out onto the sidewalk and eyed his henchman with pained dignity.

"That," he said, "is an angel with purple hair. She's waiting for a friend. And," he added, "she has trouble managing her wings so let's look sharp with this door."

"Wit poiple hair, he says!" George shook his head slowly and sadly. "Look, Boss, them wings woik — I seen 'em move!"

"I seen 'em too!" Gordon replied, and he added thoughtfully, "Now

you've seen everything." Then he turned away. He looked at his watch. About three minutes.

George touched his cap as the taxi slid in to the curb and he opened the door with an automatic and practised flourish. No tip. No lady. Quiet looking young fellow. Sunburnt. A little wrinkled for the Mabuhay. George remembered him vaguely. Long and lean. Worried look about him.

"'Evening, sir!" he said.

"Hi."

He ducked the marquee and a big easy hand brushed the heavy glass door aside.

"Hi, Mr. Gordon," he said.

Craig rarely forgot a name. A face never. But after all he was a little upset. Then it came back. Jake Halloran, test pilot out at Monarch Aircraft. Lot of publicity lately . . . new jet fighter, fast like lightning but with bugs in it. Giving everybody trouble. Nice looking kid, this Halloran. Looks as though he's been hitting the bottle . . . a little.

"A seat at the bar, Mr. Halloran?"

"Thanks," and then to the barman, "Hi, Joe."

"Hello, Mr. Halloran, how're things?"

"Quiet. I'm resting for a week. Weary in m' bones. Could do with a martini, Joe."

"Sure thing!" said Joe, who'd had one long look, and who knew when to talk and when to keep quiet. "Sure thing!" Softly.

It wasn't until the martini was put lovingly before him that he saw her. It was then that he felt the tension in the place. He felt it first in Joe's quick, worried glance over into the room behind, and he took a quick look himself. Girl sitting alone. Pretty girl, but a bad light. *Very* pretty girl. Funny kind of a dress she had on. *Very, very* pretty girl!

He turned back to his martini and studied it thoughtfully. He didn't pick it up. Then he spoke. Gently.

"You a philosopher, Joe?"

Joe smiled indulgently.

"Psychologist?"

"Not me, Mr. Halloran. I've seen lots of 'em come and go, though."

Jake was persistent. Something on his mind, Joe decided. He put down the glass he was polishing and listened.

"Ever get a sudden feeling that you've been somewhere before . . . same place . . . same time . . . same words . . . but you can't put your finger on it?" Jake studied his glass again.

"Know what you mean," Joe said, "happens to everybody — even me, once in a while." Then he added, proudly, "French call it *déjà vu*. Means 'seen before' or something. But you've been here lots lately."

Jake Halloran shook his head.

"That's not it, Joe," he said. He shook his head again, sharply, and ran his hand across his forehead.

He's plenty worried, Joe was thinking. Or maybe tight. . . . No, not tight. Then Joe leaned on the bar and watched.

Jake Halloran turned slowly, an inch at a time, toward that dim corner where the strangers sit. His eyes were on the floor until he faced the corner and then he raised them slowly. For a long minute he sat there and then slowly he got up and walked towards her.

She smiled, and the smile lit up the room. She moved aside and the slim brown hand patted the seat beside her.

"Hi," she whispered. There was the harp again. "I've been waiting for you!"

"I know," he said.

The great white wings moved quietly in the dimness and he saw them move but he was not surprised.

"I know," he repeated, and he sat down gently beside her, being careful about the wings. "I knew you would be here."

"Of course you knew," she said. "I sent for you."

He nodded slowly and looked full into her eyes. Then he looked at her hair and he smelled the dew from the roses.

"Your hair," he began, "it's lovely."

"Heliotrope," she answered, and then she added, "Pale purple."

"I remember now," he said.

"But you've never seen me before!"

"No," he answered, "but I remember."

She touched his hand gently.

"You've not been very well, Jake Halloran!"

He looked from her eyes down at the table.

"I'm fine," he said and he flexed strong brown fingers.

"I mean inside, Jake." Her voice was a caress. "What's happened to the boy I followed to New Guinea and back? Lost something?"

"You, I guess."

She nodded thoughtfully.

"I thought you were going good. Expect I've left you alone too long." Then she searched his face. "Been drinking a bit, Jake?"

He nodded slowly without answering.

"Sobering up," he said. "Week of it. I've been having some trouble with that new Cheetah job. Too hot. Too wild. I was about to blow my top. Had to relax someway."

"I know," she said. "Have one with me, Jake?"

"You . . . drink?" He was a little startled.

"Scotch and milk," she smiled. "Call the waiter, and hurry! We've got things to do!"

By twos and trickles the Club Mabuhay was filling. Craig Gordon sadly clicked the switch that controlled the dim wall light over the strangers' corner, and diplomatically steered some of his best customers from their favorite tables. He kept nervous watch over the dark corner, and so well had he controlled the lighting that he lost only two customers. In the middle of frozen daiquiris. Those wings! The hair, alone, the Mabuhay could handle.

Jake Halloran paid his check at the bar and studied the gilt and plate glass door carefully. He looked over the chattering crowd and eased over to Craig Gordon's post by the door.

"Got a back entrance, Mr. Gordon?" he queried anxiously.

"Know what you mean, Mr. Halloran," Gordon replied. "There is a back door, but it's out through the store room. Narrow. Boxes and stuff. She'd never make it!" He peered speculatively over Halloran's shoulder.

"Thanks. Will you get me a cab? A big one?"

Gordon nodded nervously and eased the glass doors open a crack.

"George," he said, "get me the biggest cab you can find and look sharp on this door!"

The nose flattened immediately, against the glass.

Jake Halloran stood by the table and looked down.

"Let's go," he said. "We've got things to do."

She stood up. The wings settled smoothly along the sheath of gold lamé. A crackling silence filled the Club Mabuhay.

"Let's go," she said.

George was sharp with the door.

Behind there was bedlam.

The big taxi swung smartly into Sutton Place and pulled up near the corner of Fifty-sixth. "This is it," said Jake.

"Costume party, hey Mac?" quipped the driver brightly.

"I can only stay a minute, Jake," she said. "Things to do."

"Gotta find you a place to stay," said Jake. "Like the Plaza?"

"I think I would. Do you?"

"Yup . . . know the assistant manager. We'll call him."

"Good!" she murmured. "And do I meet Stewart now?"

"You know about Tom?"

"Sure!"

"Nice guy. With me at Nadzab."

She smiled.

"I know," she said. "I know him well. I rode with him one day."

"I'm jealous."

"Not of Tom, Jake. He needed me that day."

"I remember," he said. "It was the day the Betty tagged him over Buna."

"And then you tagged the Betty!"

"You put me there!"

She smiled up at him as they climbed the stairs.

"I love you," he said.

He swung the door open wide and the wings came through and Stewart sat there with the phone in one hand and a glass in the other and he had on a pair of chartreuse shorts. That was all. He didn't look around but he saluted backwards, over his shoulder, with the glass.

"But darling," he was saying to the phone, "I'm a changed man. That night was years ago and I'm more mature now!" And then he listened and covered the mouthpiece with the back of his glass hand. "Hi, Jake!" he said to the room behind. "How's about a short one?"

"Company, Tom," Jake said gently.

The great white wings were spread softly over the back of the divan and the smile warmed the room and the voice that belonged to the wind was speaking.

"Hi, Tom," she said.

Stewart spun off the chair and made a wild leap for the bathroom door. And then he saw the wings. He froze, and the glass in his hand dropped quietly onto the carpet.

"Hello, Tom Stewart!" she said again.

He forgot the phone, and the glass and the chartreuse shorts.

"I know you," he said and his eyes were fixed and glazed. "What have you done to your hair?"

"Potts thought I was kidding," Jake explained as they rolled up to the Plaza's Fifty-ninth Street entrance. "I don't know him very well, but they're nice folks here and they'll take care of you if anyone can. They'll even keep French poodles." Thoughtlessly.

She was hurt. He knew it immediately and contrition came flooding.

"Darling, I'm sorry!"

She touched his arm.

There was a whispered flurry from the lobby as they walked in. Mr. Potts, at the desk, took one glance. Precursory. Practised.

"Good evening, Mr. Halloran . . . and is this the . . . this the . . ."

The wings were stirring restlessly.

"My God!" said Mr. Potts and he beckoned aimlessly, frantically behind him. Four bellmen and two desk clerks sprang forward. Only one of them made it. A boy from Brooklyn.

"We'd like to go right up, Mr. Potts," said Jake. "I'll register for her in a few minutes."

Mr. Potts had not spent fifteen years on the Plaza desk for nothing. To give him full credit let it be said here that he made a nice recovery. At least he was making a nice recovery until the pigeons came in. Four of them. Straight through the open door-way that looked out onto the Park. They made one swift circuit of the lobby and lighted with a whistling swish beside the golden slippers. The Plaza's Fifty-ninth Street lobby was suddenly filled with the gurgling croon of four of the fattest, dirtiest pigeons that Central Park could offer. Pigeons in ecstasy. Round and round the floor before her they waltzed and pirouetted.

One of them fluttered joyously to her shoulder, and she leaned her lovely head towards it and from deep in her throat came a soft, melodious purring

croon. From the Palm Court . . . from the East lobby . . . from the Oak Room white, staring faces came pouring. Well bred faces. Cultured voices. But all the mouths were open, and the voices were hoarse and strained.

"Please come this way, Mr. Halloran, Miss . . . Miss . . .?"

Potts made a nice recovery. Shows what training will do.

The pigeons came too. So did the contents of the East lobby, and the Palm Court, and the Oak Room. So did a couple of querulous policemen.

The multitude approached the south elevators. The pale purple head leaned caressingly toward the pigeon on the golden shoulder. Again that deep-throated croon. But this time with a rising inflection. The pigeon launched itself past Mr. Potts's head. The three others, waddling behind the golden slippers, whistled up and away and they were suddenly gone. The soft brown eyes that fixed on Mr. Potts were misty.

"Mr. Potts," she said, "Mr. Halloran and I should like to be shown to my room, and there be served a Scotch and milk. Alone."

"And that's the way it is," Jake was saying. "The way I figure it this new turbo jet is just a mite too potent for this little ship. I've worried and worked and driven myself nearly nuts with it. It flies," he said, "and how it flies!" And he lowered his eyes to his glass. "Actually, I'm afraid of it."

"What's the Cheetah's wingspan, Jake?" she asked.

"Twenty-nine feet," he said and then, curiously, "What's yours?"

"Fifteen four, tip to tip," she smiled, and she stretched them to the ceiling. She yawned. "Feels good!"

"Do you realize I don't even know what to call you?"

"Call me Bess."

"How will I register you downstairs? Address . . . that sort of thing?" She smiled gently.

"You do it, Jake. And now you must go. I'll find you after a while."

Stewart was on the telephone again when Jake returned. Another girl this time. He hung up immediately.

"Now talk?" he said.

"Tomorrow. I've got to go out to the factory now."

"Tonight, Jake? What for?"

"I've got to think. About the Cheetah. And I've got to look at it while I'm doing it."

"Jake, it's no good! That crate has got a hex. I've begged you and threatened you and pleaded with you to give it up. You're gonna knock yourself off in that crazy squirt-gun. You know they can't get anyone else to fly it. How's about forgetting it? I'll get you a date. We'll go out and hang one on, like old times. How's about it, Bud?"

"Can't. I've got a date with an angel, later on."

Stewart's ruddy face paled a little.

"Where is she now?" he demanded. "And *who* and *what* is she?"

Jake looked long at his friend.

"She's an angel," he said, "with purple hair, and she's in Room 643 at the Plaza. Her name is Bess."

"She going to stay?" Tom queried sharply.

"She can't," Jake's voice was low, "she's gotta go back. She ran away. She hasn't got a green pass."

"Back *where*?" The sharp question rang off the walls and the ceiling.

"You know where."

The Monarch Aircraft factory lay dark and empty. Down past the darkened tool rooms, on out past sub-assembly where the slim hulls of the Cheetahs lay, row on row, on through final assembly to the flight test dock, Jake and the night chief walked, their footsteps echoing from the high metal walls. There, in the ghostly light of the night lamps crouched the Cheetah. Tiny, she was, and wicked as the wind but there was a soft sheen on her swept-back silver wings and Jake reached out and touched her, ran his hand along her flanks and caressed the sleek nose.

"You can go back to your phone now, Mac," he said. "I want to crawl around her a bit. Think I've got an idea or two."

"Okay, Mr. Halloran," the guard replied. "If you need anything, use the phone over there in Dispatch," and he walked off into the murky hangar, his heels echoing hollowly on the concrete.

And there they were alone. Jake Halloran. The Cheetah.

Gently he eased back the slim plexiglass hatch and climbed up into the tiny cockpit. He settled back and toed the rudder pedals and touched the familiar stub of a control stick. With a shudder he remembered the shocking whip of that stick as she broke Mach .9 five days ago. Oh, she was fast, the bitch. If she could just be tamed. He knew, suddenly, the remorse of a quit-

ter. He had asked for this rest. Sure, he had wanted to think. But he had been afraid. Tired. But here, again, was that job to do. He couldn't quit now. He knew the design was sound. He knew the loving care that had shaped and formed those sleekly beautiful lines. He knew the tremendous surging power of the new jet engine there behind his head. He knew this ship. But *where* did she get that mean streak? That instinct to kill?

He sat bolt upright in the cockpit. Off there in the shadows something had stirred. It moved again. Towards him, and the Cheetah. And then she moved under the light and she was soft and warm in something grey and flowing and her beautiful hair caught the soft glow of the night lamp.

Jake let his head sink back against the shock pad.

"I love you," he said. And he meant it.

Without a sound or a word she walked to the Cheetah's side. Her soft chin came just to the cockpit coaming, and Jake stretched out a hand to touch her cheek.

She smiled.

"I love you, Bess," he said again.

She looked at him gravely.

"I know you do," she said.

"You know all about me, don't you?"

She nodded.

"So what do I do now?" His voice was sharp with desperation.

The lovely head leaned down to the satiny skin of the Cheetah.

"I don't know, Jake. I'll have to find out."

"Find out?" Again the sharpness of despair was in his voice. "Find out! From whom?"

The head did not lift, and the voice was a murmur.

"You know perfectly well from whom."

"Bess . . . darling . . . listen to me . . ." But his eager, earnest voice trailed off and the shadows swallowed the echo.

There was a long silence. Somewhere high up in the ceiling beams a bird twittered nervously, and the Cheetah's elevators clanged softly as Jake let go the control stick and climbed wearily out of the cockpit.

"Tomorrow we'll talk about it," she said. "Right now we've got things to do. Any ideas yet?"

"Nope."

"How does she go, Jake? 'Smatter with her?"

"High speed stall . . . whips to the left. Comes up on sonic speed . . . high mach numbers . . . like a nineteen-ten model coal truck with solid tires on cobblestones."

"How d'you figure it?"

He thought for a minute.

"Bess, I don't *know!* The only thing I'm sure about is that she's trying to kill somebody. Me! I've babied this mean little b— thing — and petted it through four major design changes. She's basically all right. I know that. I've tried everything, except long spins. I haven't spun her yet. Scared to."

"Jake, do you remember the old P-40?"

"Sure I do. I've got a lot of time in 'em. Why?"

"Do you remember that wing root stall — just off the runway — whip to the left?"

"Sure I remember it. But they licked that in a hurry. It was just one of those unpredictable things. Things happen with all new models."

"How did they lick it, Jake?"

"Why . . ." he was deep in thought now. "They put a new fillet on the wing root. She flew like an angel after that. Hey!" he said. "You mean . . . you mean?" He studied the Cheetah's beautifully faired wing root with eyes that were alight with eagerness.

Then, "I know what you mean," he said quietly. "Where's that phone?"

He talked earnestly and long with Rogers, the design engineer. Yes, the model was still available for wind tunnel tests. They could, of course, if he insisted, run some wing-root stall tests tomorrow. In ten minutes Rogers was enthusiastic too. First thing tomorrow. Would he be available for in-flight checks on the prototype?

Jake would be available.

He dashed out of the darkened Dispatch office and took her in his arms. The wings were a little in the way but she stretched them towards the high ceiling and her lips were warm and they tasted of spring roses.

"I love you, Bess!" he said again.

"I know," and there was a deep concern in her voice.

"Let's not talk about it tomorrow, Bess!" he pleaded. "Let's talk about it now."

"All right," she said. "But I must talk first."

He listened gravely.

"The world," she said, "is very large, and you, in spite of what you are about to say, have *not* seen it, nor do you know much of the joy and happiness which can be found here. . . . *Shhh!*"

He had been about to interrupt.

"You are very young — twenty-seven years and four months old you are. You are capable and strong and intelligent . . . and . . . and charming. There should be none of this bitterness in your heart. The world is not right, but you can help to make it right. This little ship, for example, is not right. Tomorrow you will make it right. In the years to come you will help to make others right. You will fall in love and marry . . . a mortal. You will have a fine, full life. I shall see to that. Personally.

"But," she continued, "you have seen fit to fall in love with me, because you are . . ." she hesitated, "because you are grateful, I suppose, and because you think me attractive . . . and because, subconsciously, you wish to escape from this world and what you choose to consider your troubles. They are *my* troubles — *you* are my trouble."

She looked him full in the eyes.

"You've given me a lot of trouble, Jake Halloran . . . and now . . . now you're giving me more. You see . . . you see . . ." and the mist was in her eyes. "I love you too!

"That," she continued firmly, "is not permitted."

And suddenly she was gone into the shadows.

Stewart was not in the apartment when he returned to Sutton Place and the loneliness closed in like the cold fog that drifts in from the Sound. He wandered aimlessly about the apartment for a while, found a half empty bottle of Scotch in the kitchen, put it back, and finally, a while after midnight, called Room 643 at the Plaza. There was no answer.

He called again at two in the morning. Still no answer. Stewart came in at four, and finally, just as the sky out over the river began to fade into grey, he fell asleep. At eight-thirty the telephone rang, and it was Rogers. He had already made one run in the tunnel. It was the wing root. It was the wing root beyond question. How about an in-flight test on the prototype at eleven? High speed turning stalls? Jake said that he would be there at ten thirty, and hung up. Then he called 643 at the Plaza. There was no answer.

He could hardly have expected her to answer. She was standing there as he put the telephone slowly back on its cradle. She was standing there looking into his eyes as he turned.

"Hi!" she said, softly. "Going flying?"

For a long, long time he looked into her eyes and then they went a little misty again and she dropped them and she was intently examining the tip of a silver slipper that was digging into the carpet.

"I love you," he said.

"I know, Jake. I *know*!"

"Stay here with me!" he said, and there was urgency and loneliness and heartache in his voice.

She raised her eyes to his own and the mist was still there.

"I can't," she whispered. "I love you . . . and I can't," and then she was suddenly in his arms.

At thirty thousand he leveled the Cheetah out of its thrusting surging climb and the sound of the slipstream rose in pitch and volume to the old familiar, terrifying whine. The roaring of the jet behind him was lost to his ears. Only the slipstream. The control stick stiffened and bucked in his hand. That was familiar too. But today it didn't matter. This business was about licked. Three tight turns left. Three right. About eight G's. Then he would have it. Then Rogers could go ahead on that new wing root.

He called back to the tower, somewhere back in the hazy spit of land that was Long Island. "Thirty thousand . . . outside air minus one five . . . Mach seven . . . slight aileron ripples . . . buffeting her elevators again . . ." and as he swept into the first turn the G suit swelled and bit into his thighs and his armpits. "Seven and a half." And then he shook his head to clear his eyes and squeezed her to the right, pulling her tighter and tighter and a grey-black curtain streaked with red closed down and he could barely read the accelerometer. "Nine . . ." and then he nosed her down and the pitch of her slipstream whine screamed into a high soprano, now left . . . and then she whipped . . . and he had it. Had it! Cold, dead and certain. And he called the tower and Rogers who was waiting there took the mike for a minute and then went scuttling down to the big drawing board in his office.

He didn't tell the tower he was going to spin it. Long, to the left. Four

turns. He didn't even know he was going to do it himself. But he did. Something told him to. Rogers would want to know. And besides, it was his day, his hour, and it was the least he could do. The least he could do.

The Cheetah arched up and out and as the high-pitched whine faded to a whisper he called in.

The tower called the front office on the interphone. Almost before the Cheetah shuddered off into her whipping, dizzy spiral they were pouring out onto the flight ramp, dozens and hundreds of them who loved Jake Halloran and the Cheetah. They saw the speck come whistling down and they knew, most of them, that it would never come out. Jake Halloran had known it after the first two turns.

He didn't try to get out with his 'chute. It was probably because he knew, somehow, that that was the way it had to be. It was because he knew, suddenly, why he had had to spin the ship, and because he knew, now, why it wouldn't come out. It was the only thing that she could have done. He knew that too.

He called the tower again. "Nineteen thousand . . . seven counted turns . . . no aileron response. She spins flat — four tries at recovery — tell Rogers she needs a tail 'chute." And there was no answer. ". . . tower — do you read?" And the tower knew that Halloran was riding her in.

The purple head was bowed in her hands and the voice that belonged to the wind was a desperate whisper. "Is this what you want, Jake — is this what you will have? Get out now, Jake. Quickly. Go out the left side . . . go out on the inside of the spin, Jake — you know how . . . quickly . . . quickly. I'll watch over you, darling! I'll show you. . . . Quickly, my darling! Now!" — And Jake Halloran heard, and he smiled and the Cheetah struck.

