

WHEN SALLY
COMES
MARCHING
HOME

When Sally comes marching home

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For Catherine

One

Trinity atomic test site, Alamogordo, New Mexico – 15 July 1945

Sally Honeychurch took her eyes off the desert road to glance sideways at the man sitting in the passenger seat, the man sweating, trembling and clutching his metal case so tightly his fingers had turned white.

Keep talking. Keep him calm. We're almost there.

Aloud, she said, 'It's only two more miles to your test tower. Should be a piece of cake. Before the war I drove from Mombasa to Cairo over some of the worst roads in Africa. This place is dead flat . . . I mean, flat.'

The man tightened his grip on the metal casket.

Okay, bad choice of words. Just keep driving.

Dr Richard Borden, hadn't said a word since getting into the car with his case at the assembly lab. It was up to her to make the running. A trickle of sweat ran down the side of her face, and she knew it wasn't just due to the baking desert heat.

It's that damned box of tricks.

Sally shifted her attention back to the road. All around the car, the flat yellow-white sands stretched to the horizon, broken only by the black metal skeleton of the Trinity test tower. She hadn't driven this road they now bumped over with painful slowness. 'Road' might be stretching things. It looked more like a dusty trail worn by the scores of US Army trucks carrying steelwork, crates stencilled 'Secret', and chattering groups of scientists and army engineers in desert shorts and hats to protect them from the ferocious New Mexico sun.

She leaned forward over the wheel, eyes probing the track ahead, keeping her speed to five miles an hour, biting her lip at every bone-jarring plunge relayed through the hard-sprung leather

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seat. It wasn't the worst surface she'd driven over but they'd warned her that flash floods could gouge potholes and gullies in the sand deep enough to break an axle. It didn't help that this stretch of desert was known as *Jornada del Muerto* – Day of the Dead.

'If he asks, tell him it's called White Sands', Oppenheimer had advised her. 'That's what we're calling it in the press hand-outs.'

Sally's car wasn't painted the olive drab of army vehicles, like the Military Police jeeps that trailed in safety half a mile behind them, but shiny black, frosted with sand, and not a utility vehicle but a Ford Hudson. It was the same limousine she had driven earlier that morning when she delivered her Chief, General Sir Stewart Menzies, to the Alamogordo Air Force Base. They'd offered her a jeep for this job but she'd turned it down.

'I'd rather stick with a car I know already,' she'd told them. The truth was simpler. I've got enough to worry about with Dr Borden and his box. And I'm fed up with pushing seats back to get my legs in – how come there's so many short-arse drivers in this country for Pete's sake?

Sally had her window wound right down, elbow on the sill. They'd told her to keep them closed up tight because of the stinging sand but Sally needed the feel of the hot air on her cheeks and she liked the smell of the desert: the sour smell of juniper and creosote. Something natural to hang onto in this unnatural place carved by war out of silence and loneliness.

When she'd driven down from Albuquerque two hours earlier, as the chill dawn broke across the desert, Menzies had seemed self-absorbed. He'd lounged in the back, in his full British military uniform as a Lieutenant-General – 'Nothing like a little gold braid to impress the natives', he'd said. He stared out of the window, tapped his signet ring against the glass, gazed sullenly across the brightening sand. She could guess what was coming.

'What's this urgent matter Oppenheimer wants to talk about?' He'd looked out of the window as though his attention were outside, focused on the mesquite trees and the tumbleweed.

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‘I think he wants to discuss it in person with you, sir – in private.’

‘Fill me in now and I’ll act surprised.’

It felt like telling tales out of school, but she’d learned that when the Chief wanted to know the score, it was wiser to make sure he had all the facts at his fingertips.

‘It’s one of our chaps, sir – Dr Borden. He’s head of the Chemical and Metallurgy Division. His people are responsible for producing the explosive core of the Gadget – that’s what they call the bomb down here. Of all the British scientists he’s been by far my most difficult charge.’

‘Difficult in what way?’

‘He’s been getting more and more jumpy for months and if you ask me he’s headed for a breakdown. I’ve had to go and fish him out of some of the worst bars in Albuquerque a couple of times, sober him up and put him to bed. I had to quieten down a few of the local roughnecks who were giving him a hard time when he was pie-eyed.’

‘Any bones broken?’

Sally grinned briefly in the rear view mirror but Menzies’ face was straight, as usual. ‘I didn’t exactly break anything, sir. Just knocked a few heads together, that’s all. The bar called the sheriff, but I paid him off.’

‘And what does Oppenheimer expect me to do about it? The man’s a scientist. They’re all half-mad aren’t they? Can’t they just send him home?’

‘He’s developed the explosive core of this new thing and apparently no-one else can install it today. He hasn’t got an American opposite number, so he’s just got to be up to the job. That’s all there is to it.’

When they arrived at the base Robert Oppenheimer was pacing the veranda, cigarette in hand, his badly-fitting suit liberally dusted with ash. He opened the car door without waiting for Sally to perform the duty, making no attempt to conceal his anxiety. He kept the ritual greeting to a minimum and began speaking to Menzies while they were still standing in the entrance hall. Pretty poor

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security, Sally thought, gabbing away like that in the open with dozens of people wandering about. But what was she supposed to do – lecture the head of MI6 and the head of the Manhattan Project on proper protocol?

‘General, it’s good to have you in person as the official British observer, sir, but I’m afraid we’ve run into a problem with one of your fellows. It’s threatening to delay the test.’

Menzies listened to the rest of the outburst with the concentration of a family doctor being told about a troublesome cough, and remembered his promise to Sally to appear astonished.

‘The point, is, sir,’ Oppenheimer said with a warning note of finality, ‘Without Dr Borden, we may well have to call off today’s shot.’

Menzies delivered his solution with the same family doctor air. ‘I understand Borden places a lot of confidence in our liaison officer – Honeychurch. How would it be if she drove him and his components to the site?’

Sally was careful to keep a blank expression on her face. He mustn’t suspect she was party to the suggestion.

Oppenheimer threw her an evasive glance. ‘No disrespect to your *driver*, General – Miss Honeychurch is a very capable liaison officer. But this is a matter of the highest national security, and no job for a girl.’ He gestured to the half dozen very large, impeccably dressed U.S. Marines, acting as Military Police – the same toughs who had already scared Borden out of his wits.

Sally turned and looked away across the desert. She pressed her fingernails into the palm of her hand, and tightened her jaw. She pretended not to see two of the inflated marines smirk knowingly at each other.

Menzies adopted a half distracted tone of voice as though asking the porter at White’s Club to fetch his hat. ‘Professor, let me assure you that *Major* Honeychurch has my full confidence. And with great respect to your doubtless excellent men here, Major Honeychurch has almost certainly killed more Nazis than all of them put together. I chose her as my driver because I trust her with my life.’

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The warm glow of pride growing in Sally's chest quickly vanished when Menzies turned back to her, delivered a wink invisible to Oppenheimer, and said, 'That all right with you, Major?'

It had seemed a reasonable idea at 9:00 when the sun hung low and the heat was bearable. But at past 11:00, the desert was now a shimmering furnace and she and her charge were exposed on the white sands like the lizards frantically seeking cracks in which to crawl. Only they had no shelter except the black bones of the Trinity test site tower – the place the science wallahs were calling 'Ground Zero'.

Before they got in the car, the medic had given Borden a quick shot of phenobarb but the effect was already wearing off. For the first mile or so he had sat rigid in the passenger seat, grasping the special metal box with hands like talons, staring straight ahead and unresponsive to her attempts at conversation.

A month earlier one of the American scientists – a recently-qualified lad only a couple of years younger than her – had made a fatal mistake while tinkering about with the same core that Borden clutched now, knocked over a pile of uranium blocks, and was caught in a burst of radiation that filled the lab with a blinding flash of blue light. He took two days to die, in agonising pain. The stuff in Borden's box was much more powerful than uranium – so powerful it was in two halves. If the halves touched they wouldn't need to wait two days. There'd be nothing to bury. Just having the thing so close to her made her want to put her foot down a little harder, but she fought back the urge.

Her passenger began stirring in his seat and looking around him. He was still muddled by the drug because his first words were, 'Is this the site? Have we arrived?'

Glad of a response of any kind, she said, 'Not yet, sir. We're nearly there, though.'

Borden stared at her as though having difficulty focusing. 'Are you some kind of Viking, Major? You look like a Viking.'

Sally turned to Borden and grinned. 'I'm English, like you Dr Borden. Although you can never tell about the ancestors, can

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you?’ She’d hardly finished speaking when the wheel was wrenched violently from her hands and her shoulder slammed against the door – the nose of the car leapt and bucked like a wild mustang. Last night’s storm had torn a deep gulley in the desert floor, invisible until they were already on it.

The violence of the impact jolted Borden. He cried out, his hands flew to his face and the metal case slipped, hit the dash with a forceful crack, and began to topple in slow motion to the foot-well of the car. He looked wildly around him and opened the door, frantically moving his feet as wide apart as he could get them. Sally reached to steady him but before she could get a hold he threw himself bodily out of the car and rolled onto the sands. The car was still only travelling at a walking pace, so she saw him in the rear view mirror stand up uninjured, looking in horror after the car.

Sally forced herself to floor the brake pedal as gently as she could but when the car stopped, pulled the handbrake on sharply. Her blood pumped to her neck and face, her hands tingled. Whatever she was going to do she had to do immediately. Put it off and fear would strengthen its grip. She left the engine running regardless of the danger because it was standard SOE training. If you switch off a running engine, you may not be able to start it again until it cools down – something you don’t want to happen if the effing SS or Gestapo are after you.

She reached for her leather driving gauntlets from the dashboard glove compartment opened the driver’s door and walked around to the passenger side. She walked via the back of the car so the MPs could see exactly what she was doing and gave them a cheery wave. She ignored Borden, who stood motionless, aware more than anyone how pointless running away was, and forced herself to look in the car. In the passenger foot-well, the casket lay open on its side, its two semi-circular indentations empty. On the floor beside it sat two mirror-bright silver metal hemispheres, which together would make a ball about the size of a grapefruit. Innocuous little things, almost pretty. So that’s what one billion dollars’ worth of plutonium looks like.

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She pulled on the leather gloves, breathing evenly to keep her fingers from trembling, and picked up the first shiny hemisphere, her reflection distorted in the convex mirror surface. She registered that her flaxen hair was plastered to her forehead by streaks of sweat, that her makeup was running and that the metal was far heavier than she expected – heavier even than lead. Too heavy to be natural. She put it into the case, placed the second hemisphere beside it with fingertip care, closed the lid and secured the latch.

She leant on the car roof and grabbed at the plastic dosimeter they had insisted on pinning to her army blouse, fearing the film would be fogged black, but saw with relief it was still mercifully blank. As she watched, the area touched by the fingers of her gloves started to discolour.

She quickly stripped off the driving gloves, being careful not to touch the outsides. If this stuff was as poisonous as they said, even the gloves were deadly. She threw the gloves as far from the trail as she could get them, throwing away all the bad luck with them. Bad luck on the lizards and coyotes.

Sally called to the frozen scientist. ‘All right, Dr Borden. It’s all clear. Let’s get going and out of this bloody sun.’ Borden reacted as though Nanny had told him it was time for bed and tamely climbed back in the passenger seat. She handed him the metal box and he took it, gathering it in his arms like a baby.

When Sally pulled up at the base of the Trinity site, in the turning circle scored in the sands by weeks of heavy trucks, Oppenheimer and half a dozen of the science team were standing in a group waiting for them. Oppenheimer, hands on hips, still wore his baggy suit but now with a desert hat against the sun. It was clear he and the half dozen scientists clustered around him had seen everything that happened. Sally pulled up beside him, a dry smile playing on her lips. As they got out, she started to say, ‘Your taxi, sir –’

Oppenheimer cut her off, the words cascading out of his mouth, spittle flicking from his lips. ‘What in hell’s name do you

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think you're playing at, young woman? You've violated every security protocol of this whole project –'

Borden found his voice at last. 'Professor, I think Miss Honeychurch deserves credit for her quick thinking –'

'Miss Honeychurch has jeopardised years of work at its most critical moment. God only knows what damage she might have done.' He flung his arm behind and pointed to the tower where a heavy metal object that could only be the Gadget hung halfway up, twisting from a steel cable. 'We're days behind schedule as it is, Borden, thanks to you. Do you realise who's coming here today? I would have thought you would at least be concerned about your own career. This kind of meddling from some half-assed amateur female is the last thing either of us need. I was against it from the start.'

Sally's grip on the car door handle tightened, the metal hot under her hand, but she swallowed the words of protest gathering in her throat. Borden was not the only scientist feeling the pressure. Even the famous Oppenheimer was on the edge of losing his grip.

He turned his back on them, looked to the tower and signalled impatiently for the people up top to resume slowly hoisting the gadget by cable and winch to a makeshift sheet-iron hut on top. A heap of mattresses had been piled up at the foot of the tower. Some kind of bizarre safety measure. The other scientists at the foot of the tower had fallen into an embarrassed silence at Oppenheimer's flare-up and covered their discomfort by standing round the mattresses gazing up at the slow ascent, shielding their eyes from the sun. None of them looked directly at her.

Once the Gadget had reached the tower top, the still, silent tableaux came to life again, and Oppenheimer turned to Borden, glaring. 'Now it's time for you to get to work, doctor.'

All faces turned to Borden, who took a deep breath. 'I want Major Honeychurch to assist me.'

Oppenheimer exploded. 'That is completely out of the question.'

Borden held out his precious casket at arm's length to Oppenheimer and spoke with a new-found steady voice. 'I want

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Major Honeychurch to assist me or you can install the core yourself.'

Sally's eyes widened in surprise. The group stood in silence for several endless seconds. Oppenheimer, his face shadowed by his hat, shook his head slowly. He held up both arms as though in surrender, and looked down as if appealing to the earth as his witness. 'Very well. On your own head be it. I shall certainly report this breach of security to General Groves.'

There was nothing for her to do now but follow Borden onto the rudimentary open-sided platform rigged to serve as an elevator. The scorching desert slowly receded as they ascended. Sally breathed in deeply the desert juniper and tried to focus on the view.

Sally rose level with the platform at the top of the tower, and came face to face with it – the Gadget, the atomic bomb. The crude metal sphere, held together by bolts big enough for a battleship, suspended from a single steel cable, looked more like the boiler from her grandma's house than a secret weapon. This banal machine for mass murder, exiled here to the middle of nowhere, made the bile rise in Sally's throat. She'd known what they were here to do, of course, but to see the thing this close made her sick. No wonder Borden was descending into some kind of madness.

Apart from herself and Borden there were three others on the platform. One she knew was Andrew Ferguson – 'Fergie' to everyone – another of the British scientists. The second was one of the American team, although in fact he was German. She wasn't responsible for him, but she'd had sight of all the Los Alamos staff files. She automatically flicked through her mental card index and came up with a name: Haushofer, Julius, electronics expert. Quiet, industrious, Jewish refugee. Nothing known.

Both were busy adjusting the harness of electrical cables and their shiny connectors carefully woven in a symmetrical network covering the outside of the sphere. Such height of human endeavour, such meticulous precision engineering, all solely for the purpose of killing.

The third person on the platform was a diminutive GI in a rumpled uniform and hair to match, clutching an M-16 carbine that

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made him look even smaller and with a temporary Military Police armband. His uniform tag carried the name 'Nantan'. His charcoal hair and sallow skin made him difficult to place, but he was the most human looking thing in this artificial and inhuman world. Sally decided her place was best with the little MP and moved to his side, smiling at him to signal she was harmless, though he still looked a little nervous. He moved over and tried but failed to suppress a yawn.

She gave him a friendly smile. 'You look whacked.'

'I guess you could say that, ma'am. I've spent the last three nights up here.'

She shot him her hand. 'Sally Honeychurch. No need for the "ma'am". Are you saying you spend all night up here, all alone?'

'Yes ma'am. I prefer it that way.'

'Isn't it a bit creepy being out here by yourself all night?'

'I'm Indian, ma'am. Chiricahua Apache. We've been out here alone in this desert at nights for a thousand years. It don't bother us none.'

Sally thought of the hours she'd spent soaking in marshes behind the Normandy landing beaches, and hiding in the endless pine forests of the Bordeaux coast. 'I've spent a lot of nights camped out in some very uncomfortable places, and I'm sorry if this is your home, but this place gives me the creeps. I think it might have something to do with that thing.'

'If you don't mind me saying so, ma'am. You look like you could have some Indian blood too, with that hair and all.'

Her hand went to her hair, and felt it matted with sweat and fine windblown sand. In a day of crazy and improbable events this was just one more improbability. 'Half an hour ago I was told I looked like a Viking. My Dad is a Captain in the U.S. Navy, so I suppose anything's possible.'

'Well, there you go.'

Fergie and the German finished their wiring business and moved back, making way for Borden to step up onto the metal platform rigged for him. Now his moment had come he seemed more self-possessed. He pulled a pair of medical rubber gloves from

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his breast pocket, snapped them on like a surgeon, and held his casket firmly as he mounted the step.

Instinctively, Sally moved to stand protectively below him, hoping this might somehow speed things up. Fergie came and stood beside her. It was a gesture of moral support and she smiled appreciatively. Even in this sweaty heat, inside the metal hut, he was rather dishy in a Scottish kind of way and Sally wondered what the hell her hair looked like if she was being mistaken for a Red Indian. She tried to pat a few strands back into place.

‘Borden’s loading the Plutonium core now,’ Fergie confided in a low voice. ‘Once he’s done that and packed it with the Uranium tamper material, we can attach the last explosive lens. Then the thing will be armed.’

‘You mean the thing could go off – with us standing here?’

Fergie laughed grimly. ‘It would be an awful waste of money if it did. No – don’t worry it won’t go off. We have to fire all these explosive lenses – those connectors – at the same time, in less than one millionth of a second, or it won’t go off properly and we’ll have the most expensive damp squib ever made. That’s what we’re testing here. That’s the tricky bit.’

‘They told me that core cost a billion dollars. I guessed it might be slightly important.’

‘Don’t pay any attention to what Oppenheimer says. He’s only thinking of them spelling his name right in the papers and he doesn’t want to be upstaged, especially by a woman. What you did took more guts than most of the people here could muster.’

Borden looked down at them, a triumphal smile spreading across his face. It was the first time in weeks he’d looked relaxed. ‘It’s done, Fergie’.

Borden’s relief was catching. Sally managed an almost cheerful smile. ‘I think I can just about get us all in the limousine if you don’t mind squashing up a bit in the back.’

It wasn’t until after four the next morning, long after the beers and the songs in the base mess hall, when they were sitting around,

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wearily, conversation exhausted, that an unfamiliar voice over the public address system told them the test detonation was due to take place. They all trooped to the trucks outside and were driven to the designated observation site which looked to her just like any other patch of desert except it was a low hill. They put on the government-issue welder's goggles handed round by the MPs, though goggles seemed an unnecessary precaution as it was still pitch dark.

Sally stood for some time, looking towards the steel tower ten miles distant, wondering what, if anything, she was going to see. The others around her seemed to be wondering the same thing. No-one was talking. The desert night air was chill and she wished she had brought some kind of coat. She rubbed her arms to keep warm. The night seemed strange, unreal, lonely. How did I ever wind up here in this god-forsaken place? *What am I doing, Alain? I'm so alone without you.*

Fergie came and stood beside her. 'What are you going to do now the war's over?'

She hesitated. 'I hadn't really thought about it like that. I don't have anything else. The secret intelligence game's my career now. What about you?'

'Build bigger and better bombs, I expect. Assuming this thing works.'

They continued to wait and nothing continued to happen, until in the far distance the darkness was broken by a signal rocket shooting across the sky. Fergie tapped her arm with the back of his hand and said, 'This is it,' in the tone of voice normally used to convey the news that the number eleven bus has arrived. There was an indistinct announcement from several clanging loudspeakers at once and then, as if with the flick of a switch, the sun burned daylight bright in the sky. Only this sun went on getting brighter and brighter, far brighter than ordinary sunlight, and Sally felt forced to turn her head away. When the flash came it wasn't just visual. It was an intense physical force that hit her like a punch in the stomach. The flash left her stunned, with a taste like brass in her mouth and she felt the heat blast on her face and neck.

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The next few seconds – minutes – were a confusion of rolling thunder that grew louder and louder until she put her hands over her ears and a shock wave lifted the desert floor beneath her feet like a carpet being shaken – an earthquake that reminded her how small she was and how easily her world could be shattered to pieces.

When she took her hands away from her ears and looked towards the test site again a cloud of smoke and flame had rocketed a thousand feet into the sky, lit from within by twisting columns of flame. In France she had seen and heard exploding ammunition dumps and oil refineries – targets she had blown up herself. She had seen yellow and red flame illuminating clouds of black smoke. As she looked now at Ground Zero, something a hundred times worse and a hundred times more repulsive had bloomed out of the desert. Blue and scarlet and repulsive purple flashed in the roiling clouds and – finally – the bilious, venomous green that instinct had told her would be at the heart of this evil thing, as though they had opened a door to hell. In the pit of her stomach she felt a sick horror she had never known before, as though she had witnessed a ritual act of barbarism and had somehow colluded in it just by being present at the hideous birth.

Sally became aware of a noise a little way off in the darkness. It sounded like an animal in distress. She walked towards the sound and found Richard Borden sitting on the ground, sobbing and trying to speak. She wasn't sure whether he was talking to her or rambling to himself, his voice was strangled, muted. 'I didn't know . . . It was me who made the core . . . it was just a set of equations . . . they said it was just an experiment . . .'

She helped him to his feet and he seemed to get over the attack of nerves and pull himself together. 'This is the second time today you've saved me from myself, Major. I . . . I owe you a very big debt . . . these past few months . . .'

His eyes seemed to have sunk into a face that was now pale grey and his hands were shaking. He looked awful, but his voice was firm enough. Perhaps a little too firm.

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‘Just doing my job, sir. You chaps and your scientific secrets are my family, you know.’ He looked like he was cracking up completely. ‘Is there anything I can do to help you?’

‘I’m . . . I’m really very sorry about the way Oppenheimer treated you. These arses have been making my life a misery for months, one way or another. I’ll be glad to get sh . . . sh. . . shot of the lot of them and get back home now it’s all over.’

Sally smiled in sympathy. ‘The feeling’s mutual, doctor.’

Borden was in visible difficulty expressing his feelings. ‘You . . . you’ve been very good to me, Major Honeychurch. I . . . I’d . . . like repay your kindness, somehow.’

‘You really don’t owe me anything. If it wasn’t for you and the other Brits out here, I would never have been here to see that thing.’ She pointed to the flashing cloud, still climbing into the sky. ‘I don’t know if it’s a good thing or a bad thing, but it’s certainly one of the biggest things that’s happened in this war and I was part of it.’

Borden stared at the cloud mushrooming higher and higher and Sally saw tears were running down his grey cheeks. ‘I thought we were doing something good. Now I’ve seen what we’ve done, I haven’t the slightest doubt this thing is evil, Major. And you and I are the only people in this world who have held the core of that thing in the palm of our hands. What does that make us?’

Two

Menzies the gentleman civil servant, in his drab grey pinstripe suit, was a different man from Menzies the general, resplendent in military uniform. And the grey London skyline in January was a world away from the scorching New Mexico desert of six months ago.

Sally sat stiffly in the visitor's chair in the Chief's office, while he stood with his back to her, looking out of the windows of the Secret Intelligence Service's Broadway headquarters. He seemed to be seeking inspiration from the slate rooftops of St James's. She leaned forward ready to catch every word. Menzies remained silent but his back did the talking, loud and clear.

I'm for the chop. That's why he can't face me. The tension grew in her stomach and she half hoped her prediction was wrong, but she had spoken to two other ex-SOE women from the French Section who had already received the hard word. She knew what was coming.

When Menzies turned and spoke, his hair was a little greyer than she remembered, his face more lined, and set in a grim mask that left no room for doubt. 'Now the war with Japan is over, Downing Street has decided Special Operations is to be wound up, right away. I've spoken to Lord Selborne this morning after he briefed the new Prime Minister, and I gather Attlee almost had a fit when he heard about the worldwide network SOE has built up, what with radio stations and press agencies and God knows what else. Apparently, he said he had "no desire to own a Russian-style secret police". Frankly, I know how he feels, although Lord knows we can't afford to lose people with your experience.'

Knowing it was coming didn't make it any easier. For four years – it seemed more like the whole of her lifetime – there had

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been first Special Operations Executive, then British Security Co-ordination in the States and then SIS in London.

All she could manage to say was, ‘So that’s it, then sir? Out on my ear and no alternative?’

‘I had been hoping to keep you on – I only wish there was something I could offer you, even if it was only on a freelance basis. But I’m afraid we’re going to be starved of funds from now on – or at least until the powers that be in Westminster wake up to the fact that the Russians are no friends of ours. That could be quite some time.’

‘When do I have to pack up, sir?’

‘Attlee’s insisting the whole thing’s got to be wound up in 48 hours. Damned bad form, if you ask me, after all you and your people have done, but that’s apparently the post-war world we’re now living in. I’m truly sorry, but there it is.’

She searched her mind for some chance of a reprieve ‘What about the British scientists on the Manhattan Project, sir? What becomes of them now? And our liaison with them?’

‘I’m afraid British-American co-operation is something else that’s come to an end with the war. It seems President Truman is stopping all joint development work. We’re on our own now as far as the atom bomb is concerned and our scientists will be coming back to work in this country. Those who haven’t been chucked off for security reasons, like that troublemaker of yours – what’s his name?’

‘You mean Dr Borden? He wasn’t a troublemaker. He just had his nerves stretched to breaking point by the pressure.’

‘Well, whatever the reason he’s off atomic research now along with a couple of others who have lost their security clearance for one reason or another. And Attlee is forming a special police force to deal with atomic security, so that role is closed to us now, too.’ The note of disappointment in his voice suggested another Whitehall battle fought and lost.

Expecting the news hadn’t made it any easier to take and now she shuddered at the brutality of it. ‘Is the whole of SOE for the chop then, sir?’

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Menzies looked evasively at the unlit briar pipe he was playing with. ‘We are taking some SOE people into SIS. But it’s all men, I’m afraid. No female roles at all. No jobs for girls.’

No jobs for girls? No effing jobs for girls? Why the hell did I bother to stick my neck out? Why did I give everything I’ve got for effing King and effing country?

Menzies’ own defence of her in New Mexico justified registering a protest. ‘Seems a bit unfair, doesn’t it sir, considering the work the women did in France and elsewhere, if not even one of us gets to carry on using all those skills we’ve learned.’

Menzies looked levelly at her. ‘Let me be completely frank with you. The reason women were recruited into military service in 1942 was because any young man who was dropped into enemy territory was immediately suspect and usually got rounded up. On the other hand, the average German is so contemptuous of women and so prejudiced against females, that Nazi soldiers found it inconceivable that a young woman like you, riding through town on her bicycle, could be a soldier trained in unarmed combat, weapons and explosives and could present a real threat to them. So women agents usually went unchallenged and unnoticed.’

‘A bit ironic, then, sir. Women were needed when there was a war on, but we’re not needed now.’

‘I may tell you there was a lot of opposition to women being recruited into SOE in the first place. Some senior people in the RAF were talking about refusing to fly you to France – until Winston sat on them. To be frank, it’s not much better now. I sometimes wonder just how much difference there is between the typical German and the typical Englishman as far as women are concerned. Still, as I say, there it is.’

‘To be perfectly honest, sir, I did think the women of the French Section were setting something of a precedent, and the Service could be a career. Now it sounds like we were just a bit of a nuisance. What with atom bombs and the rest of it I’ve had enough of the Army to last me for a while. It looks like I’ll have to go back to teaching.’ Sally had her arms crossed tight across her chest and

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knew she was edging towards something she fought at all costs: showing emotion.

Then Menzies made it worse, taking on a fatherly tone of voice. ‘Don’t forget to put your expenses in – I’ll sign them off. And there’ll be your gratuity. You’ll also be entitled to get your medical expenses met. And there’ll be a final sign-off with the medic. We like to send people back the same as we found them. Not always possible in our line of work, of course, but you’ve still got two arms and two legs, so you should be all right.’

Sally didn’t answer, just focused on blinking back the threat of hot tears.

Menzies fumbled again with the pipe, still unlit. Anything to keep from witnessing the expression of devastation on Sally’s face.

‘Why don’t you settle down, get married, start a family? Attractive girl like you.’

Sally felt her cheeks burning. How indiscreet. How unprofessional. She’d never known the Chief to slip up before: it was always strictly military discipline. No talking in the ranks. Then it hit her in a rush: she was on the outside now. Barely controlling the tremor in her voice she said, ‘First things first, Sir. I’d better find something to keep me busy or I’ll go crazy. I might go back to Africa if the teaching doesn’t work out.’

Menzies came around the desk and extended his hand. ‘Well, whatever you do, I want you to know the service you and your section has performed won’t be forgotten. If you get to Africa, send me a postcard.’

In St James’s, Sally waited on the pavement near the underground station, hardly noticing the commuters hurrying around her. She raised a listless arm to hail a cab and told the driver to take her to Harley Street. It was only twenty minutes on the tube but she felt washed out and in no mood to stand up on a train or traipse around city streets for her medical appointment.

The rain that had been threatening all afternoon began just as the cab pulled up outside the practice in Harley Street. She paid off the cabbie, pulled her raincoat up around her cheeks and dashed for

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the shiny black front door with its polished brass handle and stack of clinically neat bell pushes. The receptionist ushered her into a waiting room smelling of wet woollen coats and, as she waited, she tried to fix her hair in the glass of an engraving of the Swiss alps.

The over-confident young doctor, Fisher, was the same man who had signed her off for active service when she joined SOE four years earlier. She sat in front of his well-polished desk while he opened the buff file in front of him, one of a number his practice nurse had laid out for him. Hers had a red star stuck to the cover, like several of the others.

‘You’re one of my Baker Street people, if I remember rightly.’

‘That’s right, doctor. I saw you when I joined up.’

He flicked through the file, lifting flimsy page after page, ‘Let’s see what we’ve got here. You were X-Rayed for a suspected broken ankle in ’42. How’s that now?’

‘It’s fine, it was just a sprain. I landed awkwardly in training. Nothing broken.’

‘Bitten on the hand by a cat. That cleared up?’

‘It was the training instructor’s cat. They made me have a jab in case it was infected but it was nothing.’

‘Bullet wound to the left upper arm. How’s that now?’

‘It was just a flesh wound. It healed up in a few weeks.’

‘Does it give you any trouble?’

‘I didn’t even notice it when it happened, to be honest. Adrenalin, I suppose. But I couldn’t risk getting it patched up in France so they sent a Lysander from Tangmere to get me out.’

He nodded in agreement though she could tell he hadn’t the slightest idea what she was talking about. She hadn’t noticed the Nazi bullet that tore through her arm because she was holding Alain Frenay, trying to stop the blood from his chest wound with her scarf. Alain’s last words to her were, ‘Help me, Sally’. Then he died in her arms. He left her, just like that. She remembered how cold her face felt, as if all the life had gone out of her with Alain.

Dr. Fisher came to the last page and closed the file. ‘Well now. How have you been?’

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‘I’m fine, doctor. I’m just having a bit of trouble adjusting to civvy street again now the war’s over. A bit of trouble sleeping sometimes.’ She would have preferred a woman doctor but there were only men in the practice.

‘That’s hardly surprising given what you’ve been through. It’s quite normal and I shouldn’t worry too much about it, if I were you. You know, too much worry can be a source of problems in itself. I can give you some pills to help you, but they would only be the kind of things I give to nervous housewives to calm them down. Is that what you want?’

Sally shook her head. ‘No, of course not. I’m not ready for the funny farm yet. Just not quite my old self, that’s all.’

‘Not really your style, I think.’ He agreed.

There was silence and Dr Fisher waited patiently, hands locked on the desktop, looking at her, head tilted, inviting her to open up.

‘There is one other thing – I don’t know if it’s anything but I thought I’d just mention it while I’m here. I sometimes see things out of the corner of my eye, but when I look there’s nothing there.’

‘What sort of things?’

‘You know, all sorts.’

‘No, I’m afraid I don’t know, unless you tell me.’

‘Ordinary things like a suitcase or a coat.’

He began to make notes again in her file. ‘Anything else?’

‘Usually it’s an animal like a black fox or black dog. That kind of thing . . .’

He made more notes. ‘How’s your memory of the things that happened to you in the war?’

‘It all seems very hazy most of the time. I remember being there, but not the small details. Then, occasionally, for no particular reason, I get a very sharp, clear image of some specific time and place – buying a loaf in the baker’s, or seeing the postman call. . .’

He sat back in his chair. ‘I know you can’t talk about it, but I believe you were under cover?’

‘I was in occupied France, behind enemy lines, for two years. I did see a lot of action – the bullet wound and so on. It may

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sound funny but I didn't mind the action. The most difficult part was that for most of the time I had to pretend to be a meek and mild schoolteacher. It's surprising how it can get on your nerves, pretending to be something you're not . . .'

He nodded sympathetically. 'And is it still something that gets on your nerves now?'

'I suppose it is in a way. Although I'm not under cover any more.'

'Aren't you?'

'Of course not. I'm in the armed services. Or I used to be. Now I don't really know who I am. I mean . . . what I'm doing.'

He placed his pen down and sat back in his chair. 'This is something I see quite a lot. People who have been under stress in the field for a prolonged period of time often report seeing and hearing things. It's one of the symptoms of what's called "battle fatigue", which is just a long way of saying delayed reaction to stress. Your senses have been on full alert for so long they detect the slightest thing and think the worst. Your imagination does the rest.'

He made some additional notes in her file. 'I think I will give you some pills that might help if things get on top of you. I take it they gave you something when you were in the field?'

'They gave us Benzedrine tablets – you know, to keep us going.'

'What I'm giving you are like the things you took in the war only stronger – just in case you start seeing too many black dogs. They can be quite powerful, so go easy on them.'

'Thanks doctor. I probably won't need them at all.'

'The best advice I can offer you is to give yourself a chance to settle back into some kind of normality. Avoid stress as far as you can. It's the recurring stress that's the problem. Have some fun. Just live a normal life and come back and see me in six months, and we'll see how you're getting on.'

He said this in a tone of voice that suggested the consultation was over, but she continued to sit there, not yet ready to leave.

'Is there anything else you'd like to tell me about?'

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She wanted to tell him about the shakes. About the nightmares. About Alain. But what was the point? She was out of it now. It was all over. Time to move on. She wanted a drink – a couple of large whiskies for a start. Better make it a pub where she wouldn't meet anyone she knew, though. Not around Harley Street. Or Baker Street. Or St James's. Somewhere no-one knows me. Maybe I am still under cover, after all.

Three

Miss Ames, prowling the first floor corridor, saw Sally sitting alone in the sixth form classroom, marking a pile of exercise books and homed in like a doodlebug on its target.

‘I’m not one to complain, as you know, Miss Honeychurch, but I’m afraid your girls have been cleaning their hockey boots on the senior common room table again. I shudder to think what would happen to my reputation and the school’s if they did anything like that at home.’

There are three things wrong with that, Miss Ames. They’re not my girls, they’re yours. You never stop complaining. And no-one else gives a damn where they clean their boots as long as they play a decent game, and win.

Aloud she said, ‘Thanks for letting me know, Miss Ames. I’ll have a word with the girls after break.’ She watched as the headmistress left the classroom to resume her sharp-eyed patrol of the school, wishing Miss Ames would treat her more like one of the teachers and less like one of the girls.

She reproached herself for her disloyal thoughts. Miss Ames was of a generation whose fiancés went to the trenches and never came back. She and the women like her stayed at home knitting scarves and balaclavas until there was no point any- more, and then spent a lifetime of spinsterhood teaching and writing poems in diaries no-one would ever read.

She’s never really cottoned to me, Sally thought, because I’m not ladylike enough – like her generation. If I wore dresses instead of slacks and taught the sixth form to crochet instead of how to defend themselves, she’d think the sun shone from my earhole. As it is . . .

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She left the thought unfinished, abandoned marking, and stared out of the classroom window to the playing fields. The sixth form girls were larking about in the break, playing a scratch game of hockey with no goal posts and only half a team, their urgent shouts a pleasant background noise. The summer had been wet, but September and the new term had brought some finer weather and even some spells of welcome sunshine.

For nine easy months, she had found comfort in the ordinary things of school life – things she had completely forgotten about for the past five years. The smell of chalk dust and powdered ink. The soft, undemanding ordinariness of the same old desks, the same old blackboard and easel, the same old posters showing women picking tea in Ceylon. Even the petty carping of Miss Ames at imaginary offences was a return to a kind of normality.

But along with the comforting surroundings and the return to the normal came the dullness of spirit, dullness of mind, dullness of body. Morning press-ups in her bed-sitting room did nothing to sharpen her senses. The fog that enveloped her mind seemed to descend just the same. Judo lessons in the gym with the breathless sixth formers was like teaching babies to ride a tricycle. Her visits to the off-licence in Guildford were becoming more frequent and she now always carried a packet of peppermints in her bag. Dr Fisher's pills were still untouched, but she had placed the little brown bottle on the mantelpiece – a perpetual challenge to her strength of will. How much longer could she hold out? Not much more at this rate.

The impromptu game outside erupted with shouts and cheers of triumph as a tennis ball was swept into the back of an imaginary net. There was only – what? Seven? Eight? – years separating her from the oldest of the girls outside and yet there was a whole world between them. A chasm that could not even be spoken of, let alone bridged. They were just children, laughing and naïve, while she was old beyond her 26 years – at least old in mind and spirit.

The things I've seen, I couldn't even begin to describe and I doubt they would believe me even if I could. Oh God, I miss you. I miss you, Alain. I couldn't help you. There was blood in your

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beautiful fair hair. I wanted to try to get it out before it dried and left a mark but there wasn't time. There just wasn't time.

No time. In a year or so, the shouting kids outside would begin work as secretaries, as librarians, as buyers in department stores. A few would go up to university and study English or History. They were the kind of nice girls The Clara Ames Academy produced to order, for the satisfaction of nice parents in nice homes. None of them would be dropping by night into occupied France, behind enemy lines, breaking necks, knifing Nazis in the guts, or blowing up munitions dumps. It all seemed unreal and dreamlike, now peace had come again. The whole world had changed into a different place.

She'd flirted for some time with the idea of going back to Africa again, getting a job as a guide. But she'd finally faced the fact she was no longer the same person she'd been at 21. The edge had gone from the hunger for excitement that she'd felt back then, her reactions not quite so sharp, her youthful audacity now tempered by experience. There was something to be said for the ordinary and the predictable after all.

When morning break was over and the sixth form straggled back to class, it took some minutes to quieten them down from their victories on the games field. The four girls she thought of privately as 'The Crush Brigade' stationed themselves adoringly in the front row. Sally relayed Miss Ames' diktat about the cleaning of boots. Rosemary, Ingrid, Sylvia and Coral, who were collectively and individually the worst offenders, received this stern warning with obvious pleasure.

When she told them to take out their French books, Rosemary asked, 'Please Miss, is it true you went to France in the war? How did you get there, Miss? Was it by boat?'

Sally had fielded variations on this theme many times since the beginning of term and had, from the first week, resolved to stick to the absolute truth, while keeping strictly mum.

'It was too dangerous to visit France by boat during the war, Rosemary. The coast was too well guarded. And anyway, people in

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Britain had to stay home and do as they were told, as you should do, too.'

Rosemary wasn't easily deflected. 'My father says some women were spies in the war, Miss. He says they parachuted into France. Do you think that can be true?'

'I think anything is possible, but not everything you hear is true.'

Rosemary was temporarily checked but Ingrid still had ammunition to spare. 'Please, Miss, is it true you were a ballet dancer?'

Sally congratulated herself on having planted a few half-truths like this to enable her to deflect the more serious inquisitions. 'I did a bit of dancing when I was your age, but I grew too tall and had to pack it in. It won't do if you're the Swan Queen and you're bigger than Prince Siegfried. The male dancers don't like it when you're taller than them – they think you're looking down on them. Men in general, in fact. Try to remember that when you start courting – which I hope won't be for some years yet.'

'How tall are you, Miss? Are you five foot ten?'

'Five-eleven.'

'Did you have to speak French when you were a ballet dancer, Miss?'

The questions were drifting back to dangerous ground again and Sally was preparing to call a halt to it when Pandora Spain, the class dunce – "clumsinette" to her classmates – did it for her. 'Please Miss, is your hair naturally blonde or do you put something on it?'

Now the girls were becoming noisy, speaking over each other, and things started getting out of hand. 'Did you disguise yourself when you went to France, Miss? Did you meet Hitler?'

'No I never had the pleasure of meeting the Fuhrer. Now come on, you lot, get a grip or else the powers that be will descend on all of us like a ton of bricks. And the subject of this morning's lesson is the irregular verb *Savoir*, to know. Open your books to page 58.'

Halfway through the morning lesson, Sally stopped chalking the parts of *Savoir* on the blackboard and turned to find out why the

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girls were whispering among themselves. She found the cause to be the headmistress's worried face peering hesitantly through the glass. Miss Ames beckoned to her urgently. She could tell something was up and thought at once of her parents. Ma was abroad in the Middle East, and a nagging source of anxiety at the best of times. Now everything was flaring up again in Palestine, with terrorists bombing the King David Hotel, the nagging had become more insistent.

Sally kept her voice level and unworried as she told the class, 'Carry on with page 58 – I won't be a moment', and went out into the corridor.

'I'm so sorry to interrupt, Miss Honeychurch. There's a man in my office. A soldier of some kind. He says he wants to speak to a *Major* Honeychurch on an urgent matter. Would it be your father he wants? Or do you have a brother?'

Sally felt an adrenalin rush, a brightening of focus she'd not felt for nearly a year. The blood raced at her temples. Oh she'd missed this kick. She spoke in a soft voice, 'It's all right, Miss Ames. It's me they want.'

Miss Ames seemed bewildered and now smaller and older. 'Oh. He was really rather abrupt. I do hope I'm not going to have to write to the parents again . . .'

When she reached Miss Ames' office Sally found a short, stocky sergeant with a days' growth of beard, who came to attention as she entered. He wore a paratrooper's camouflage smock over his battledress and the red beret of the Parachute Regiment. He carried something dark in his right hand, partly concealed in the folds of his clothing. Sally had handled and fired Sten guns often enough to recognise the dark object and knew something big must be on. You don't carry automatic weapons around the streets of London in peacetime, let alone the streets of Guildford. She could smell the whiff of gun oil and body odour and for a brief second was back in France, ready for action.

'I'm Honeychurch, sergeant. What's up?'

'Compliments from Colonel Stanhope, ma'am. I'm to tell you he's acting on direct orders from . . .' He consulted a scrap of paper in his hand . . . 'Sir Stewart Menzies.' The Chief's name

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obviously meant nothing to the sergeant, but then it was unknown to everyone outside of SIS and Whitehall.

‘Is Colonel Stanhope your CO?’

‘That’s right ma’am.’

‘And what are your orders?’

‘I’m to request that you please accompany me to Broadway Buildings immediately. I have a car and driver outside.’

‘And suppose I say thanks, but no thanks?’

The sergeant raised the Sten to the ready position, but kept it pointed up. ‘I’ve been ordered to ensure you arrive without fail, ma’am.’

‘Does that mean you shoot anyone who tries to stop me – or shoot me if I refuse to come with you?’

The sergeant remained the cool professional. ‘With respect, ma’am, I’ve been instructed to say, “Tell the bloody woman this is no time for arguments. She’s needed, now”.’

‘Then it looks like I’d better get my coat and come with you.’

On the gravel turning circle outside the school entrance was a blue RAF Vauxhall driven by a scrawny aircraftsman barely out of his teens, and dressed in a uniform a size too big. She got in the back with the sergeant, still nursing his Sten across his knees. She remembered her sixth formers and looked back through the rear window to find the whole class, astonished faces pressed against the library window and climbing over each other to get a better look. The inquisitive Rosemary and Miss Ames, mouth open, stood on the school steps staring dumbly. Now they really did have something to gossip about.

The young RAF lad proved to be a skilful driver, traffic was light and within ten minutes they were on the A3 driving towards London as the sky darkened a little ahead of them.

‘Can you say what this is about, Sergeant . . . ?’

‘Sergeant Jacobs, ma’am. Danny Jacobs. I don’t know any more about it than you do. All I know is my CO has been put in charge of a big job and all hell is breaking loose. People are being

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collected from all over. It's some kind of top brass briefing, that I do know.'

She felt the adrenalin surge again. She didn't care what it was about. She was needed. She was back. The fields and trees passing by the windows looked sharp and clear, the greens and browns vivid against the luminescent grey of the sky. She leaned forward and tapped the lad at the wheel on the shoulder. 'What about you, Aircraftsman? Any idea what we're all doing here?'

'Sorry ma'am. I'm just a car pool driver. We were all pulled out of bed at five this morning and told to bring our vehicles down to London, park them on Horse Guards parade and await orders. I'm from RAF Henlow – near Luton. But there are drivers and cars from all over the show.'

He flicked a glance in the rear view mirror as though weighing up his audience. 'The lads think it might be an invasion.'

Four

When they reached St James's, the streets around SIS headquarters were so jammed with cars and people, they had to get out and walk the rest of the way. Sally had trouble even opening the car door. She sent the RAF lad and his vehicle back to Horse Guards Parade and started to wade through the noisy, jostling crowd, followed by Sergeant Jacobs. She pushed her way through the crush to the front entrance but found the steps and doorway choked, guarded both by police and soldiers in uniform – the Paras again, judging by their red berets.

Sally grabbed Jacobs by the arm and shouted above the racket, 'Round here – I know another way in.'

They made it to a back entrance where Jacobs had to show his special pass to more paras. Inside was just as crowded with SIS people, uniformed soldiers and police. They pushed past Post Office engineers in blue overalls trying to work in the crowded hallways, laying emergency telephone cables.

Sally expected to go to the fifth floor conference room but that was evidently too small to hold the large numbers gathered for the briefing. Instead, Jacobs took her to the canteen which had been cleared of tables with its chairs stacked up around the sides against walls and windows. Even with everyone standing and crammed in, many latecomers still had to remain in the doorways and corridor outside.

Sergeant Jacobs stayed close to her, his weapon drawing curious glances, although others in the room were also openly armed – a rare event since the war's end. Sally found herself standing beside two very senior officers, one Army and the other Royal Navy. The brigadier sounded testy, 'I've no idea what the hell the War Office is playing at now, but all leave's been cancelled, that

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much I do know.’ His naval companion was equally impatient, ‘I heard the Chief has been closeted with the Cabinet all morning.’

She stood on tiptoe to see who else was in the room and found she was the only woman out of around 200 or so men. After they’d hung around for some time, tension in the room growing, the hubbub outside begin to quieten down, and then the people inside fell silent, as uniformed figures pushed their way into the room and, with some difficulty down to the small dais at the far end of the canteen. During the war, Tommy Handley and other radio comedians had entertained the nation and the armed forces from this platform with their broadcasts. Now it was occupied by Menzies, his Deputy, ‘Sinbad’ Sinclair, some military types in uniform, Sir Ralph Mercer, chief scientific adviser to the Home Office, and the Commissioner of the Metropolitan Police, Sir Harold Scott.

Sensing the moment had arrived, Sally grabbed Sergeant Jacobs by the sleeve of his tunic and yanked for him to follow her as she shoved her way to the front of the crowd. Senior brass looked indignantly at her as she shouldered past, but they fell back to let her through to the front.

Someone rapped loudly on a table top and the room fell silent. The Police Commissioner, Scott, was first to speak and Sally was close enough to see he was visibly in trouble. His face was a pale grey colour, he looked as though he had not slept for days and his hands trembled as he read from a clipboard with a prepared statement, to a room that became totally rapt and silent.

‘Around 03:00 hours this morning, an armed gang attacked the main bonded warehouse of His Majesty’s Customs and Excise in the Pool of London, at Hay’s Wharf. The gang broke in, shot and killed fourteen customs officers and administrative staff . . .’ He looked up from the clipboard to let this sink in before continuing ‘. . . killed fourteen customs officers and administrative staff, and stole two crates that had been unloaded a few hours earlier from the steamship *Oriola*, out of Rotterdam. Crime on this scale using automatic weapons and with the probable purpose of this raid, is beyond the resources of the Metropolitan Police to deal with alone

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and I have called in the Ministry of Defence. I'm now going to hand over to Sir Stewart Menzies of the MOD to complete this briefing.'

Menzies was holding an index card on which were scribbled some notes, but he spoke without referring to them.

'I have to tell you that we have compelling reasons to believe the murders you've just heard about are the first step in a plot by terrorists – persons as yet unknown – to smuggle an improvised atomic bomb into this country with the probable intention of setting it off and . . .'

The uproar of hundreds of voices burst on the room immediately, drowning out Menzies' next words. He was forced to call for order several times and repeat his message twice more in response to demands from the floor. Someone fetched a chair and the police Commissioner, Scott, sat down, removing his peaked cap and wiping his face with his handkerchief.

Sally found she was holding tensely onto the strap of her shoulder bag, her fingers gripping so tightly they were numb. She could sense Danny Jacobs beside her had frozen. Menzies' words had, in a split second, taken her back to the New Mexico desert, face to face with a hideous devil's rainbow, dyeing a black boiling cloud of death and destruction, and the gateway that opened into hell. The horror she had felt in the pit of her stomach that night returned now. Her face and hands felt cold as night in the desert.

Jacobs said slowly, 'Fuckin' 'ell . . . pardon my French, ma'am. What the 'ell are we supposed to do about that? Run for it?'

'I have a horrible feeling it's going to get worse than that. Listen.' Her own voice sounded strange, shaking with emotion.

When the room had quietened down enough for him to make himself heard, Menzies continued. 'As yet we know nothing about who these people are and what their target is, though I think we can assume it is most likely London.

'Special branch has found both the hold of the ship and the bonded warehouse contain strong traces of radioactivity. The experts say it's of a type that could come only from the materials used in atomic bombs. And the weight of the wooden crates and the so–

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called “industrial machinery” the cargo manifest listed is consistent with that.

‘I have just come from Downing Street where the Cabinet has been meeting for the past four hours to consider the situation. Attlee and Morrison have been advised that evacuating eight million people from London is not, I repeat not, a feasible option. After long discussions, the Metropolitan Police and Ministry of Defence have concluded that the only option open to us is to mount an intensive manhunt to find these people before they can carry out their plan to detonate a bomb, if that is their intention.

‘We have been told by atomic scientists from Woolwich that it is virtually impossible for anyone to smuggle in such a device in a finished state – they must necessarily assemble the components contained in the crates they have stolen, including the radioactive material which has left traces.’ He nodded to Sir Ralph Mercer. ‘To assemble a viable bomb, the experts think, must take at least four or five days. If that’s correct – and we must pray it is – then we have a short period in which to act.

‘You here – army, police and Security Service – are being split up into search teams under the overall control of Colonel Peter Stanhope of the Parachute Regiment. Some of you know him, some of you don’t. But he is a first rate field commander in whom I and the Cabinet have absolute confidence, so I want you to carry out whatever orders he may give you as though they are from your own commanding officer. Peter . . .’

Sally strained forward, looked intently at the man who stepped up to speak, gauging every available clue: mid-30s, tall, charismatic in a skew-whiff kind of way. She had never met him but she was able to conjure up some recollections from her mental card index, and in any case, his name had been in the papers the previous year. Stanhope had been one of the most successful commanders on D-Day, landing behind Sword Beach with the 6th Airborne Division and later dropping over the Rhine and fighting with Montgomery’s army all the way to Berlin. In the photos she recalled from the papers he had always been smiling for the cameras. Today his face was grim, and there was no cheerful thumbs up for the camera. In

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contrast to the two previous speakers, his voice was pitched low and steady. He spoke with the confidence of a man who had been given a job to do and the men to do it.

‘There are 116 postal areas in the London region. Major Cunningham and Major Whitlock will assign each team of officers one postal area. Those of you who are not already armed will draw service revolvers from the armourer and one box of .38 ammunition. Transport to your areas will be available, but you will conduct your area searches on foot. You are looking for heavy vehicles, capable of loading between five and 10 tons. For any building that could house crates of this size, especially buildings with pulleys or other lifting gear, such as garages, factories and large workshops. There are two Geiger counters available to be called on and we have some technical people on standby. Search HQ will be here at Broadway Buildings. I want reports hourly, even if they are negative, and I want you to telephone Major Cunningham or Major Whitlock as soon as you’ve cleared an entire postal area – you’ll get the numbers to ring once the Post Office lines have gone in.

‘One more thing. it’s important we don’t start a panic that will prevent us doing our job. You all have security clearance and you all did hush-hush jobs in the war – treat this in the same way. Keep mum to your family and friends. I know that’s going to be hard, but we must avoid panic at all costs or every street in London will be jammed and our job made impossible. Imperative: say nothing to reporters. A cover story is being put out to Fleet Street. As far as the public is concerned, it was an IRA raid to obtain arms that went wrong.’

‘There’s no need for me to tell you gentlemen we’re looking for a needle in a very large haystack – or what could happen if we don’t find these people and put a stop to it. A lot of lives are depending on us. Let’s get on with the job.’

The men in the hall started sorting themselves into ragged queues to receive their assigned districts. As they broke up Stanhope called over their heads, ‘And the home team over here with me.’

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Menzies stepped down from the platform, singled Sally out and took her to one side by the arm. He, too, looked as though he hadn't slept for some time, his face dark, his eyes sunken.

'I've sent for you because I want you on Colonel Stanhope's team. You're the only person I can lay hands on easily who's been trained for field work and who has seen an atomic bomb and its workings at first hand. You probably know more about it than most of the people in this room. I've got to go now, so I'm leaving you to make your own way.'

Sally chewed her lip in disappointment at being cut adrift before she'd even started. 'Where are you going now, sir?'

'I've got to get over to the Palace with the PM. Someone's got to tell the King. I'm going to recommend the Royal Family move to Balmoral until this is resolved one way or another. It would be better still to get them safely to Canada, and there's a destroyer getting up steam at Southampton.' He shook his head sadly. 'But they wouldn't go in 1940 so I don't suppose they'll go now. Perhaps I can at least persuade them to send the two Princesses away somewhere safe.'

Sally stared at Menzies' back as he shouldered through the throng. And what about me? What in hell's name do you expect me to do alone? When he had left, she breathed deeply and spoke to herself as the Chief would have. Where is the woman I sent to parachute behind enemy lines? She's needed now.

She approached the small group that had surrounded Colonel Stanhope and stood behind the assembled officers to catch his briefing. Stanhope was saying . . . 'We can't just wait around hoping one of the search teams will get lucky. We've got to take the initiative somehow. But we've got bugger all to go on. In my book there are only two groups who could possibly be behind a stunt like this: the Russians and the Zionists. My money's on the Zionists. Remember, the Irgun blew up the King David Hotel in Jerusalem two months ago, killed God knows how many Brits. And a lot of the scientists from the Manhattan Project were Jews who have gone to Palestine to found a homeland, so they have the know-how. We

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haven't got anything else at the moment so that's what I and the home team are going to be concentrating on.'

His 'home team' started to spread out, leaving Stanhope and two junior officers, waiting for the Colonel to finish signing off a thick sheaf of requisition forms attached to a clipboard. Sally decided she had better speak up before he, too, disappeared.

'Excuse me, Colonel Stanhope, I'm Sally Honeychurch, I was with Special Operations in the war and I believe . . . '

Stanhope continued initialling the orders and spoke without looking up. 'I know who you are, Miss. Your technical knowledge may come in useful at some stage but I'd appreciate it if you'd make yourself scarce in the meantime and let my men get on with their job. The important thing is to find these people and deal with them.'

'The point is, I am trained in field work, too, sir. I'd like to help . . . '

He looked up sharply. 'Miss Honeychurch. This is a job for the men of the armed forces – not a gym mistress who once did a two week course in how to bayonet a sandbag. We're looking for an atom bomb – not playing netball.'

Sally turned white with rage. It took all her willpower to remember she was once again under military discipline and to keep her voice level. 'May I remind the Colonel I've had first-hand experience of atomic weapons from the time I spent at Los Alamos.'

'You'll get your chance to use your technical knowledge once my men have laid hands on these people. Until then it's man's work.'

'What do you want me to do then, sir?'

'I've recommended to Menzies that you devote your time to trawling through the registries of MI5 and SIS. There are plenty of files on both Russians and Zionist terrorists in there and you may well be able to provide some names for my teams to bring in for questioning.'

'Very well, sir. Where would you like me to work?'

'Anywhere you like as long as you don't get in the way. I expect to get very busy here in the next 24 hours.'

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Stanhope swept off, flanked by his staff, leaving her standing alone, fists clenched and shaking with anger. It had been many years since anyone had spoken to her like that – and got away with it.

Sergeant Jacobs approached her and spoke cautiously. ‘You’ll have to excuse the Colonel, ma’am – he’s got a lot on his plate. He can be a bit of a bastard sometimes. But he gets the job done.’

Sally shook her head to clear her mind. ‘Don’t worry I’ve been insulted by bigger and uglier mugs. And we’ve all got important jobs to do.’

‘What are you going to do now then, ma’am?’

‘I’m going to take a look at this bonded warehouse where the shooting took place. See what else I can find out.’

‘I’ll get a car, ma’am.’

‘Sergeant, I can take care of myself, but thank you.’

Jacobs pulled a face and pointed in the direction in which Stanhope had swept off. ‘I’ve had orders from his nibs, ma’am. I’m to go everywhere you go. Take you wherever you want. And if anyone tries to lay a finger on you, I’m to put a bullet in their head.’

Sally threw her raincoat round her shoulders. ‘I can do my own shooting if I need to, but I get it. Orders are orders. Better call that car.’

Five

‘They took a hell of a pasting down here,’ said Sergeant Jacobs, looking out of the passenger window. ‘A lot of it was bombed so badly they’re not even going to bother to rebuild it, both sides of the river. Half of St Katherine’s Dock went that way.’

Sally stared through the windscreen at the depressing rows of bomb-site after bomb-site as she threaded the car along the streets of Southwark into Bermondsey through what remained of docklands. She could even trace the progress of a stick of bombs as they had fallen across the cramped streets of terraced houses, leaving a trail of dark gaps like missing teeth in a prizefighter’s jaw.

Sally had dismissed the driver of the pool car, telling him to find somewhere to get a bite of lunch, and taken the wheel of the blue RAF Vauxhall herself. She trusted herself behind the wheel more than any raw conscript.

Some of the bombed buildings they passed had been dug out and their cellars lined with tar to turn them into makeshift rainwater reservoirs for the fire brigade to use in the Blitz. The whitewashed signs from 1940 saying ‘Danger Deep Water’ were already fading. Most of the sites had settled down to become a no-man’s land of earth and rubble, colonised by rosebay willow-herb and London pride. In one, the bright red of a single rose bravely marked what was once a much loved garden. The houses still standing had windows and doors boarded up with rough wooden planks and were now playgrounds for ragged kids re-enacting the Battle of Britain, outstretched arms for wings

‘Breaks my heart to see it like this,’ Jacobs said. ‘I knew all these streets before the war.’

‘Are you from round here?’

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He nodded. ‘Bermondsey boy, me. My mum’s house got flattened while I was nice and safe learning to jump out of a plane. She and the old man were all right, though. My dad was a brickie and he built a shelter at the bottom of our garden. He made the walls so thick it even took a direct hit, and they just walked away. It all seems so long ago, now.’

The depressing reality of destruction all around them was even more disturbing than the newsreels of the bombing she had watched in horror at the cinema week after week and the wireless bulletins on BBC News night after night in 1940. Now the firemen and the air raid wardens had gone and all that was left was a wasteland. It was no surprise the docks were the Luftwaffe’s number one target – without the millions of tons of food and goods unloaded and warehoused here, Britain would have been on her knees in a matter of months – maybe weeks. And now it was those millions of tons of food and the hundreds of merchant ships delivering it that gave an enemy the opportunity to smuggle parts of an atom bomb into London.

Jacobs echoed her thoughts. ‘I can remember when there were ships queued up to find a berth and unload their cargoes, strung out all the way from the Pool of London down as far as Limehouse Reach.’

Driving through Southwark and Bermondsey postal districts they passed discreet well-dressed men in their 30s and 40s walking smartly along the pavements, making notes and trying the doors of small buildings most likely hiding nothing more sinister than local factories employing housewives to make lampshades, men’s shirts and cheap cigarettes.

Despite the mass murder that had taken place in the early morning hours it was business as usual in the docks. Sally manoeuvred slowly into the lorry parking area outside the bonded warehouse at Hay’s Wharf, looking for an office. A trio of dockworkers, manhandling a crate that dangled from a wharf-side crane, paused to stare at the RAF car with the woman driver. Sally gave them a large wave and they quickly resumed work while she looked around for someone in charge. She didn’t have to wait long.

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A well-fed, ruddy-faced man in the cap and dark blue uniform of the Customs and Excise service rolled towards them. He ducked down to see who was in the car and walked round to the passenger's side. He rapped on the window with an official knuckle.

When Jacobs wound the window down, the official leaned down, looked suspiciously at the occupants of the car. 'Who might you be, laddie?'

Sally replied, 'I'm investigating the incident earlier this morning.'

The official didn't take his eyes off Jacobs. 'I'm talking to the organ grinder, miss, not his monkey. Now then, laddie. Have you got official permission to be here?'

Sally sighed. 'Show him my official permission, Sergeant.' Jacobs reached down, picked up his Sten gun and rested the barrel on the window ledge a few inches from the florid face. The customs man stepped away quickly, holding both hands up, almost falling over backwards.

'All right, all right. Keep your hair on. I'm only doing my job. We 'ave had terrorists here, you know. I can't just let all and sundry walk in.'

Sally got out. 'I want to see the warehouse that was attacked.'

The official didn't look at her but spoke to Jacobs. 'What for?'

Sally walked over to the official and looked down on him. 'A fresh pair of eyes might see something that's been overlooked.'

The man continued to address Jacobs. 'Nothin's been overlooked. My men have been over it and the police have been over it. Uncle Tom Cobley and All's been over it.'

'We'll take a look anyway.' Sally started walking away, the customs man scuttling after her.

The bonded warehouse, identified by the Royal Customs & Excise crown over its row of arched doorways, was operational again except for one pair of double wooden doors at the end, sealed with heavy ropes and guarded by two bored squaddies from the

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regular army, rifles slung idly over their shoulders. The Customs man said, 'Open up. The sergeant wants to look inside.'

Jacobs placed his hand on the customs officer's arm. 'Actually chief, it's *Major* Honeychurch who wants to see inside.'

The official motioned grumpily to the squaddies to pull the wooden doors wide. The first thing that hit her as the doors swung open was the smell. The bodies had been taken away and some attempt had been made to hose down the floors, but the blood had soaked into the timbers leaving ragged brownish stains and the stomach-turning stench of dead meat was everywhere. The customs man smirked and winked at sergeant Jacobs, expecting her to be repelled by the reek, but she had smelled much worse in the Gestapo cells in Orvault. It was Jacobs who went outside and gasped lungful of clean air.

Sally focussed on understanding what had happened only hours earlier. She stood with her back to the entrance and reconstructed it in her mind's eye: the sudden unexpected assault, the frantic attempts to raise the alarm and fight back against a determined enemy. Unbidden, memories of France flooded back.

How would we have assaulted the place, Alain? How would FREELANCE have done the job? Knowing him, he would have charged straight in, bull-headed as usual, at the head of his resistance group, while she and Mac would have looked for a weakness, a blind spot. Some of the officers inside had been armed – so the attackers wouldn't have had it all their own way – even with the element of surprise on their side. Some of the bloodstains had been left by terrorists.

The customs man took up a belligerent stance inside the doors and folded his arms. 'I told you. 'There's nothin' to find.'

The office inside the door had green-painted metal partition walls below and glass windows on top. The glass was smashed and the two wooden desks inside splintered to pieces by automatic gunfire. The Customs official said to Jacobs, who had recovered, 'There were six bodies in there. Hell of a mess. Lucky I was off last night or it would have been me.'

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Beyond the office stretched 100 yards of wooden floor, down the centre of which a corridor had long ago been marked in white paint, now scuffed and faded from years of deliveries and collections. On each side of the corridor, the space was marked off in bays with numbers stencilled on the whitewashed brick walls behind.

Sally looked in all the bays and found them empty but she could see the ancient woodblock flooring in two of them was recently gouged by inexpert use of some metal lifting device, either a forklift truck or a metal barrow. The bays were clean but for a few tiny fragments, splinters of ordinary pine from the timbers of a crate. There was nothing useful to see.

High up on the outside brick wall was a row of small circular windows. They were probably big enough for a slim man to climb through at a pinch, but whoever had taken the crates didn't bother with any such subtlety. They burst in through the front door with guns blazing and shot everyone in cold blood. They had taken the crates they came for and loaded them onto whatever vehicle they had brought for the purpose. Then they had calmly collected all their cartridge cases and left. The tidiness bothered her. FREELANCE would have done the job and got out as quickly as possible, not hung around to risk capture.

'Why did they clear up after themselves?' Sally wondered aloud.

'Ma'am?'

'Why bother to collect all their cartridge cases. They came in like a bunch of cowboys. Why tidy up?'

'Because they didn't want to leave any evidence behind, ma'am.'

'Yes obviously. But why, exactly? What I mean is what would the stuff they cleared away tell us?'

'Buggered if I know, ma'am.'

She started looking at the floor. 'Don't just stand there, you two. Help me look around. Let's see if they missed anything.'

The customs man remained motionless with his arms folded while she and Jacobs walked the length of the warehouse floor and

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back again. ‘Nothing there, ma’am. Except for some broken glass there on the floor by the wall.’

Sally looked up above the few shards of glass and saw the small oriel window high on the wall was not closed as she had first thought, but was missing its glass pane entirely. Someone had broken in, or fired through it from outside.

They went back through the entrance doors and doubled back around the side of the building followed by the customs official. It was easier now to see the small window had no glass as it failed to reflect the sky, unlike all the others.

‘Someone fired shots through that opening from a rope or a ladder.’ Sally began looking on the ground beneath the window.

‘That’s what I’m looking for.’ She knelt down, took a nail file out of her handbag and prised a small object that glinted yellow-gold from between the cracks in the worn flagstones of the old wharf. She held it up for Jacobs to see: it was a brass cartridge case.

The Customs official’s voice was a strangled whine. ‘Well no-one said anything to me about looking outside the warehouse. How was I supposed to know?’

Sally handed the cartridge case to Jacobs. ‘What do you make of that?’

‘That’s easy ma’am. I could put that in here,’ he held up his Sten gun. ‘It’s a 9 millimetre parabellum round. You must have seen a few of those in your time, too.’

‘That’s what I was thinking. It certainly narrows it down a bit.’

‘What are you going to do with that?’ Jacobs wanted to know.

Sally pulled a pocket diary and a pen from her handbag, and scribbled a note which she placed in a handkerchief with the cartridge case. ‘I want you to take this to Scotland Yard and give it personally to Inspector Mac Mackenzie in the forensics lab. Tell him it’s from me and it’s very urgent. Wait for the result and bring it to me at Broadway. And don’t take no for an answer. If you run into any official trouble, tell them you’re acting on Colonel Stanhope’s orders.’

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Jacobs took the handkerchief and looked at it doubtfully.
'But does the colonel know I'm acting on his orders, ma'am?'
'Don't worry, Danny. I'll square it with him.'

Six

Sally stood, waiting, and watched Major Whitlock's back as he walked smartly into the office in use by Stanhope as a temporary HQ. She remembered enough of Broadway's geography to know it used to be a map store, but the plan chests were now stacked against the walls and replaced by desks. She watched Whitlock lean over the Colonel's desk to speak quietly to him and point in her direction, saw Stanhope lean back in his chair to see who was waiting outside and the look of resignation that crossed his face.

Whitlock walked briskly back. 'The Colonel can give you two minutes.'

She made up her mind to take as long as she needed and marched in. Once she was standing beside his desk, he glanced up but continued to scan the paperwork. 'What is it? I hope you've got something concrete to tell me because I'm getting sod all from the field teams so far.'

'I've had a bit of good luck, sir. I went back to the bonded warehouse to see if –'

He looked up abruptly. 'Who asked you to do that? I told you to keep out of the way of my field investigation. Your job is to go through the files – see if you can give us any leads.'

'I know that, sir, but as it happens, I've found something I think does give us a lead. It's this.' She placed Scotland Yard's cellophane evidence bag containing the cartridge case on the desk in front of him. 'A friend of mine at the Yard had a look at it this afternoon and confirmed it's a 9mm parabellum. He thinks it's from a Schmeisser Machine Pistol. My friend says the ejection marks are distinctive – so we could be looking for Germans, not Russians or Zionists.'

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Stanhope poked it suspiciously with his pen, as though it might still be live. ‘Germans? Haven’t you heard, Honeychurch? The war’s over. We won. There are no more Jerry soldiers – they’ve all been disarmed.’

‘Yes sir, but if it *is* from a German weapon, then –’

‘It doesn’t matter a damn at this stage *who* they are. All that matters now is *where* they are.’

He sat back in his chair, linked his hands and looked up at her, his voice softening a little. In the sunlight, his eyes were green.

‘Look. I appreciate you using your initiative, but this isn’t really helping the search at all. There is no longer any effective German fighting force. And your parabellum cartridge case could just as easily come from my Sten gun. They were designed to use enemy ammo you know.’

‘Yes, sir, they taught us that at Arisaig.’

He looked surprised at the mention of the top secret compound where commandos were taught to kill with their bare hands. ‘You were trained in Scotland?’

Sally maintained a straight face. ‘Yes, sir. That’s where they taught us gym mistresses to bayonet sandbags.’

Stanhope sighed and returned to his search reports. ‘Okay, Honeychurch, carry on. But please stick to the files from now on.’

‘Very well, sir.’

Sally turned and marched smartly out. You may have more pips on your shoulder than me, Colonel, but you are so wrong. What matters most now is *who* they are. That will tell us where they are.

There were no signs in Broadway, you just had to know your way around. They had told her the registry was in the basement. But the shabby and cheerless corridors with their ancient pipework and peeling green paint, felt more like the boiler room of an asylum than the registry. Stanhope’s idea of her searching the files was probably nothing more than a ruse to get rid of her and perhaps demotivate her to the point of not bothering. If so, he couldn’t have picked a better place.

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She was about to give up when she saw a dim light through a pair of double doors. A ferrety-looking balding man in a crumpled suit and steel-rimmed glasses sat behind a battered wooden desk, its leather top worn by years of dull secrets. His desk faced the doors and he looked up as soon as she pushed through the double doors, rising to his feet, holding up both hands in a gesture which clearly meant she could go no further.

‘You’re not allowed in here, miss.’

Sally produced the pale blue card the Chief’s deputy had given her. ‘It’s all right. I’ve got a pass.’

The man took the square of cardboard and looked at her incredulously. ‘Where did you get this?’

‘From the Chief’s office’.

The man continued to gaze at the pass and slowly shook his head from side to side. ‘I’ll have to check on this.’ He picked up the red internal telephone on his desk and dialled an extension. When someone answered he placed his hand over the microphone on the receiver as though protecting his conversation from enemy ears. After exchanging a few muffled words he replaced the receiver.

He said with a touch of bitterness, ‘I’ve been instructed to allow you to see any files you wish. There’s a reading table at the rear you can use. However, you may not remove any files from the registry and you may not mark any file in any way, either with ink or pencil. Is that clearly understood?’

He remained standing behind his desk, raised his arms like a policeman directing traffic and repeated a set of well-worn directions in a dull monotone. ‘On your right, the stacks are mainly chronological. On the left, they’re mainly subject files, filed alphabetically, including people’s names. They are all cross indexed in the card files in the wooden cabinets over there. It’s basically the Dewey Decimal system with a few minor tweaks of our own devising.’ By this he clearly meant ‘*my own devising*’.

‘The blue file covers are SIS, the red ones are copies of MI5 and Special Branch, and the green ones are field reports from other sources – SOE, OSS, FBI and so forth. Please take no more than two files at any one time, and please write the file number in the list on

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the clipboards with your initials and time. Under no circumstances is any file to be removed from the Registry without written approval from the Chief.’

Sally folded her coat on the back of the chair and realised the reading table had been placed within view of the proprietary librarian. It had been sited so he was able to look over his shoulder from time to time – to confirm she was complying with the rules.

She wandered down the green metal stacks, trying to devise some plan of action to short-cut her research. It would take years to get through the thousands of files in the registry.

The blue files were ordered alphabetically by agents’ codenames. She located those beginning with ‘B’ and found a file with her own code name, *Bezique*. With a glance back towards the librarian’s desk, she opened it, full of curiosity. Inside were the original wireless intercepts of her messages from the field, together with their decrypts that had been circulated to more than a dozen recipients. In the margins were occasional comments, including many from the Chief. She ran her finger down a report on a successful operation in Limoges, pleased the work she had done was registered for posterity, even if it was destined to remain secret. But it also felt strange to have become a part of someone else’s history. She replaced the file, giving it a little tap with her finger as though wishing it a fond goodbye.

By five, she had gone through all of the MI5 and Special Branch files on suspected Russians and Zionist agents. Despite Colonel Stanhope’s claim that there were ‘plenty of suspects’, the reality was the material on file was laughably thin. Many of the files contained nothing more than newspaper clippings reporting protest marches, the odd rowdy clash with police and even Labour Party rallies in Trafalgar Square. Many of the minnows that had been followed to and from their homes or their places of work – government clerks and trade union officials – were probably just practice targets given to MI5 agents in training. She noted down a few names but had no real expectation the men in question would prove to be capable of assembling a weapon of mass destruction and murdering millions of people.

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Desperate for inspiration, she pressed on to the end of the cavernous basement and found a whole section in darkness, closed off by metal rail barriers. More rows of green metal racks contained many thousands of files in buff folders but there was no indication of their contents, merely the single word 'Bletchley' on the end of each rack.

She walked back to the desk at the entrance, the determined clack of her heels on the stone floor signalling ahead her curiosity. The ferrety man looked up unenthusiastically, his rimless spectacles reflecting the dim overhead lamps in their green metal shades, as he said 'Can I help you?' in a voice devoid of hope.

'What's in the closed off section at the back? The one with the code name 'Bletchley'?'

'No-one's allowed in there, Miss. Not even me.'

'Why? What's in there?'

'Those are files from the war. They're all closed'

'But it's the war I'm interested in. I'm not going to find what I'm looking for anywhere else but in the war.'

'That's as may be Miss. But no-one has permission to look at those files other than the Chief and maybe one or two other people in the MOD – and I can tell you for nothing your name's not on the list. Not even the Prime Minister could look at those files without authority.'

'Who do I see about getting authority?'

'You won't get it, I've told you.'

'Suppose I were the Prime Minister, who would I have to see?'

'The Chief, of course. But it won't do you any good.'

'We'll see about that.'

The Chief's office was empty. His secretary's chair was also vacant and here she sat on the assumption they had been called to a meeting elsewhere and would return soon. She didn't have to wait long. Half an hour later, the Chief re-appeared with a young lieutenant, whose desk she was using as her private waiting room.

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She rose to meet them and the young man sat and reasserted military order by rearranging the blotter and pens on his spotless desktop.

‘If you wish to make an appointment . . .’

But Sally was in no mood to be fobbed off yet again and addressed Menzies directly. ‘I’m sorry to bother you, Sir. I think I might possibly be onto something but I need to dig much deeper in the files.’

‘Then where’s your difficulty?’

‘I need to look in the files from the war. The ones marked ‘Bletchley’.’

‘Ah. Better come into my office.’

When they were inside, he closed the door and said, ‘I’m afraid what you’re asking is out of the question.’

‘Why, sir? What does Bletchley mean?’

‘I can’t tell you that. What I can tell you is the files were closed on express instructions from the War Cabinet on VE day in 1945. The order was signed by Winston himself.’

Sally kept the frustration out of her voice only with great difficulty. ‘Frankly, sir, I’m having both hands tied behind my back. How the hell can I be expected to stop a madman from blowing up half of London if I can’t see all the files?’

‘I understand your feelings, believe me, but my hands are tied, too. We’ll just have to work with what we’ve got. You’ve done that often enough, haven’t you?’

‘I’m sorry, sir. It’s just maddening.’

Menzies put his hand on the door handle, but before opening the door he said, ‘Even repeating the codename Bletchley could get you into a lot of trouble so don’t. Even in this building. Just stick to the open files and do your best.’

Sally returned to the registry and to a silent smirk of triumph from the ferret.

At 18:30 he put away the material on his desktop into the desk drawers, including his telephone, locked the drawers with a key on a chain from his belt and got to his feet. ‘It’s going home time now, Miss. I have to lock up for the night.’

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‘I’m afraid I can’t just drop this work. It’s too urgent.’

‘I can’t help that. I have strict instructions to lock up every night and no-one is permitted to remain in the registry – it’s against standing orders. I’d be up on a charge if I disobeyed.’

Sally reappraised him. ‘I see, you’re in the service?’

‘Captain James, miss. Royal Welch Fusiliers before I was recruited to SIS.’

‘Nice to meet you Captain. I was a Major in SOE from ‘42 to ‘45.’ She stood and approached his desk, wearing her warmest smile. ‘You see, that’s why they’ve pulled me back for this job. I can’t say anything about it, I’m afraid, but it is essential I carry on searching these files.’

‘As I say, Major, It’s against regulations. I couldn’t allow anyone to stay in here without supervision unless I get the all clear from the Chief.’

‘Please try his office, Captain James. I’m sorry I can’t say any more but it really is a matter of utmost importance. I’m certain as a fellow serviceman you understand.’

With a sigh, James produced his key, unlocked his desk drawer and took out the telephone. He dialled an extension. When his call was answered he turned his back on Sally and spoke quietly into the phone. After a minute or two he turned back and replaced the receiver with a shrug.

‘That was the Chief himself, Major. He confirms I’m to let you stay here all night. It’s against all security procedures but I don’t see what else I can do. Please confine your research to the areas I indicated earlier – or he’ll have my guts for garters.’

Once the door had latched behind the Captain, Sally headed straight to the Bletchley files. What could possibly be worth keeping so secret? Several lorry loads of Nazi bigwigs had already been tried at Nuremberg and either hanged or sent to prison for a long time. Nothing she or anyone else had found out in France and radioed back could remotely be of any use to anyone any more. So what was back there?

She took off her shoes and walked soundlessly back to the rear of the registry, the stone floor cold under her feet. She swung

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her long legs over the metal rail enclosing the ‘Bletchley’ files and took a close look. The shelves of files were secured in place by long steel bars, padlocked to the metal shelving at the end of each row by a Chubb security padlock. Sally laughed silently to herself. They were the same make as the locks Reg ‘Jelly’ Jackson had taught her group how to pick in training. Good old predictable British Army. They’d taught them to use two kirby grips straightened out to avoid having to carry anything incriminating, but she doubted Jelly Jackson had ever imagined she would be breaking into His Majesty’s most secret filing system with them.

Once she froze at faint sounds that could have been footsteps but proved to be nothing more than the noises of a building that was old and tired. Once it was open, she hung the lock on the shelf end, then carefully lowered the first steel bar to the ground soundlessly.

Her hand hovered as she hesitated to take down the first folder but she shook off the inhibiting aura of secrecy that hung around every inch of the SIS building, and began flicking through the pages. What was so closely-guarded?

Soon her hands trembled as she went from file to file flicking hungrily through the flimsy pages stamped “Ultra Secret” – a classification she had never even heard of.

She began to throw glances over her shoulder even though she knew there was no-one in the registry. She stopped reading, her heart thumping, as voices echoed from somewhere in the building and found their way down the stone basement steps. The documents in her hands were simply too hot to handle. She thought of just putting them back on the shelves and forgetting she’d seen the name Bletchley, but that wasn’t an option any more. She was more convinced than ever it was Germans they were looking for.

She carefully put the files back in place, checking to see if they had been covered by any secret method of detection but there was no talc, no tiny tell-tale fragment of rice paper, no strand of silk. She returned the padlocked steel bars to their original position. No-one in SIS headquarters had, in their wildest dreams, thought their “Ultra” secret would be seen by unauthorised eyes. It had taken the threat of an atomic explosion in the capital to make that happen.

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She was tempted to make some notes of the dates, names, places she had traced through the files but putting it down in black and white was far too dangerous. She felt very sure she would never forget the contents of 'Bletchley'.

She replaced the chair, grabbed her coat and shoes, took a last look around to make sure she hadn't forgotten anything incriminating and left the registry. She fastened the padlock Captain James had left hanging on the hasp, and made sure the doors were secure. It was ridiculous to be so fussy now, but she shuddered at the thought that unauthorised eyes might see what she had seen.

It had been raining and the night time streets were black, slick and empty. Sally felt alone, as though everyone in London had left and not told her. As though there was no one she could find, speak to, confide in.

Parked a few yards from where she stood was a familiar-looking blue RAF Vauxhall, its lights off. She looked inside and found Sergeant Jacobs asleep on the rear seat. Sally looked at her watch and realised it was gone midnight, the real reason the streets were deserted. She tapped on the window and he looked up, bleary-eyed. 'Danny, I'm really sorry. I had no idea you were waiting for me. You'd better get off home and get some sleep.'

'What about you, ma'am? Where will you go?'

'I'm not sure anywhere will be open at this time of night. I'll have to find an all-night café, if there is one open.'

'Don't do that, ma'am. Come home with me – I can put you up on the settee.'

Any other time, she would have politely refused his offer. Tonight, she felt vulnerable and afraid – more afraid than standing in the desert watching an atomic bomb detonate. She didn't want to be alone.

Seven

Sally walked mile after mile through the streets in the relentless heat amid the endless canyons of yellow-orange houses and shops, everywhere deserted and stifling, seeking some sign of life. From the corner of her eye she saw a large black animal, a wolf or panther slowly coming towards her, looking for food, continually lifting its head and sniffing the air. Should she try to hide, or run and risk attracting attention? She tried to run but found her legs wouldn't move. The animal came towards her, alerted. She tried harder to run but her legs refused to obey her. Sally woke, her heart racing, her breath coming in gasps.

The momentary relief at finding it was just a dream was quickly replaced by a hollow pit of dread that opened in her stomach and slowly spread. The nightmare was real. She turned over and blinked in the glare of the sun. It was just after dawn. Bacon was frying and a kettle whistle blew. Her legs were cramped on the too-short sofa. *Is it an operation, Alain? Are we go for today? Where do we jump off from?*

She got to her feet, shook off the remnants of sleep, and walked to the kitchen. She was reassured by the ordinariness of Sergeant Jacobs standing at the gas stove in shirtsleeves and braces, working a frying pan with a wooden spoon, scrambling some eggs. He spoke over his shoulder. 'I didn't want to wake you, ma'am. You seemed all done in.'

Sally approached the stove to see what was cooking. 'I haven't seen that many eggs for a while.'

'Don't get your hopes up, ma'am. It's not real eggs – only dried egg powder. Thank gawd for the bleedin' Yanks, eh? Still it's

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better than a poke in the eye with a sharp stick, as my old Mum used to say. I'll do some toast for us.'

'I've got out of the habit of getting up with the lark since I was demobbed.'

'You were pretty knackered if you don't mind me saying so, ma'am. I think we both were. It's a lot to take in, isn't it? Where do you start? What does a bloody atom bomb even look like, I'd like to know?'

'Funnily enough, I have seen one up close. As close as I am to you. That's why I've been called in.'

'Blimey. I did wonder. They said . . .'

'Said what? Who said?'

'Oh, just some stupid gossip. One of Handsome Harry's fan club. They thought you were the general's daughter – or his friend, something like that.'

Sally barked a short laugh. 'Well you can tell them to stick that one for a start. I just happened to have worked closely with him in the war for a short time when it mattered, that's all. And he knows what I've just told you – I have a vague idea about this terrible atom bomb. I wish I didn't, believe you me. I'd rather be in Guildford.'

They sat at the kitchen table eating rubbery scrambled egg on toast with hot sweet tea from dainty cups with painted roses on the side.

'Is this your flat?'

'It's Army married quarters, ma'am. Me and the Missus moved in here in 1937. Just after the Coronation. Only the Missus copped it on a number 75 bus in a raid in 1941 and they never moved me out. Not yet anyway. I'm hoping the records office might have got bombed too, so I can stay here. It reminds me of her, you see.'

She looked around again and recognised a woman's touch in the wallpaper, the furnishings and the china. 'I'm so sorry, Danny. I should have realised.'

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‘That’s all right, ma’am. You get used to it in wartime, don’t you? I lost a lot of good mates in Normandy and crossing the Rhine. I try not to think about it too much.’

She didn’t trust herself to speak, just nodded a stifled reply. ‘I think that’s how we all deal with it,’ she said eventually. ‘You’re lucky you still have your regiment around you. My old outfit doesn’t exist any more. Just the odd pub meeting for a few drinks.’

‘They’ll never get rid of Six Para, ma’am. Not while Handsome Harry’s our Colonel – they wouldn’t dare. He’s not afraid of anyone. Well – apart from . . .’

‘Apart from what?’

‘Don’t get me wrong ma’am. Only I think the Colonel feels more comfortable with little women he can boss around. He’s not so good with big blondes that stand up to him. That’s when he starts barking out orders.’

She laughed. ‘I see. I’ll try to bear that in mind.’

‘You’re more than welcome to stay here, ma’am. Don’t get me wrong, like. I only meant . . .’

Sally rescued him. ‘That’s kind of you, but I’ll have to make some proper arrangements while I’m in London. And I’ve got something very important to take care of this morning.’

‘They’re putting army field cots in Broadway and the MOD in Whitehall for the search teams, ma’am. You can use one of those. It’s just that I thought a real home would be nicer . . .’

‘Thanks, Danny. I appreciate it. But I’ll look after myself. I need a real base, so I’ll just have to take a little time off to sort it out.’

She looked down at her crumpled blouse and creased slacks. She was going to need not only more permanent accommodation but also a decent bath and change of clothing. She didn’t like taking an hour off this morning on personal business but she had to be on the top line if she was going to keep a clear head and be of real use.

The obvious solution was the flat in Earl’s Court her parents had bought. Far enough from the centre to be affordable but near enough to keep in touch with the life of the city and West End. It would almost certainly be unoccupied now, but it would be worth

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going to the trouble of bringing it back to life so she'd have a base of operations for the next few days – always assuming there would still be a London in a few days.

Danny looked forlorn at the news he was going to lose her again. 'My name's mud with the Colonel, ma'am. I'm supposed to be keeping him up to date with whatever it is you're doing. He called me his bloodhound. More like a bleedin' poodle.'

'Sorry, Danny. I have to find out something I believe is important and I'm halfway there – at least I hope I am. Tell your Colonel I'm following up the file suspects like he ordered me to. Just between the two of us I'm off first for a quick bath and change of clothing. I'll pick you up later. I need your help.'

'Okay, ma'am. I'll fill an extra mag for the old Sten.'

'I hope we're not going to need that.' She handed him a sheet torn from her diary. 'While I'm away take this to the Chief's secretary at Broadway. It's the address I'm going to be staying at for the next few days.'

She told Danny to take the Vauxhall and instead grabbed a taxi. Part of her plan was to re-commission her father's Alvis once she was based at Earl's Court so she would be completely independent if she needed to travel fast – intuition told her that was only too likely now.

As the cab drove into Earls Court Square Sally looked up expectantly to the mansion flat on the first floor. There was only a slim chance either of her parents would be there at the moment and hence in potential danger but it was enough to grow a knot of nervous tension in her stomach. She relaxed when she found the windows dark, and knew them both to be safely miles away – Ma in Egypt, Dad at sea with his ship. Downstairs, though, there were signs of life in the ground floor flat belonging to Uncle Gilbert. She had helped Gilbert once or twice during the war to evict unwelcome 'guests', like the young Canadian private who didn't know his own strength and had drunk a few too many whiskies. Gilbert had appointed himself as her honorary uncle and she didn't have the heart to refuse the honour. And, since he rarely stirred outside his

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flat, he was perfect person to act as key holder, while the flat was empty.

As she mounted the steps and went through the street door into the lobby, Gilbert already stood at his open flat door, holding one of his Siamese cats. ‘Puss knew you were coming, didn’t you, Puss?’ he said, addressing the struggling cat. As the cat escaped and recovered its dignity, Gilbert reached behind to his hall table and produced a ring with keys, and a yellow envelope. ‘Actually my love, I knew you must be coming because you’ve had a telegram delivered not half an hour ago. I signed for it. It was a girl, though. She didn’t even have a proper uniform. I don’t know what’s happened to telegraph boys these days, I’m sure.’

She thanked him as she took possession of the key-ring and yellow slip. ‘I’m going to be around for the next few days.’

‘Come and have supper with me. I want to hear every tiny detail.’

‘It’s kedgerree,’ he added hopefully as she began climbing the stairs.

She stopped and turned back. ‘Are you . . .?’ And halted.

‘Am I what, love?’

‘Don’t you have any plans to visit your family or anything?’

‘You’re the only family I’ve got these days, love’

‘Yes, but you must get away sometimes.’

‘Where would I go? Who’d look after my cats?’

‘Well, just look after yourself, that’s all I wanted to say.’

As she opened the door, the flat smelled cold and un-lived in, confirming Ma must still be abroad. Ma spent most of each year travelling, writing articles for the *Sunday Express* or researching for her travel books, while Dad was on active service in the Med with the U.S. Fleet.

Not much had changed since her last visit six months earlier. Ma still had the same photos on the mantelpiece of her in ATS uniform and Dad in his Naval Captain’s outfit. She called them ‘her private army’. There were some new titles in the bookcase. Ma’s most popular book, *Under The Sun: Travels in the Arabian Desert*

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had now been translated into French and there were a dozen copies of her new hardback, *Land of the Pharaohs*.

Sally made straight for the kitchen and lit the tricky gas boiler, in anticipation of a hot bath – she knew it took half an hour to get going. She opened the windows on the street side to let in some air and then found Ma's letter on the mantelpiece, propped up in front of the clock and the photo of them the three of them in front of the White House lawn.

Dear Ed/Sal,

The director of the Cairo Museum has asked me to stay on for another two or three months to help with their catalogue descriptions and it's the least I can do as they gave me so much help with the book, and it's really beautiful out here. Probably back by Xmas.

Sal, the museum has the oldest woven textiles in the world – dresses from the old kingdom 5,000 years old and they look like they were bought yesterday at C&A Modes or Selfridges. I've got photos but you really have to see the colours. You should come out here.

You can borrow my things but if you take any jewellery, please make sure you don't lose it. Is everything all right at that school? At least you're not doing anything dangerous like driving around Africa, thank heaven.

Turn boiler off when you leave and don't forget to give keys back to quaint Gilbert downstairs.

Love

Nancy/Ma

Over the years she had read dozens of similar letters, always with the call 'You must come out here' but the inviting words concealed a deeper meaning: *I'd love you to be here, but I'm happiest on my own*. To turn up out of the blue would be to rock whatever boat she was currently sailing single-handed. Once she'd grown tired of far-away places and landed back home, there would be hours of talk and laughter over wine and food. Ma was good

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value when reporting: when researching she was too focussed to be fun.

The telegram was from the Chief. The slim strip of teletype upper case letters pasted on the yellow form read, 'SITUATION REPORT MEETING MY OFFICE 21:00 THIS DAY.' It was signed BROADWAY.

The mundane words of this summons, too, held a deeper message: What the hell are you playing at? And when are you going to turn up some real evidence?

Dad's prize mantle clock – it was a ship's chronometer – showed it was still only 07:00. It was high time she shared what she had learned with someone she could trust – someone she had already trusted with her life.

Eight

Sally sprang up the steps of Trafalgar Square Underground station two at a time and through the exit onto The Strand, blinking at the low early sunlight. The morning rush hour was reaching a crescendo and the cars and buses fought for every inch of space as they funnelled towards the traffic lights that guarded the entrance to the Square and Nelson's Column. London was waking up and coming to life again. As she threaded between the vehicles, two competing taxis forgot their contest with each other and instead hooted indignantly at her for not using the crossing. She smiled at their petty self-importance. Being at the real centre of things again had made her come alive, too.

She headed across to the Lyons Corner House at the junction of Strand and Duncannon Street – big enough to get lost amongst the dozens of customers having an early morning cup of tea on the way to work, and noisy enough to provide a secure place to talk. The bells of St Martins in the Fields struck the hour as she pushed through the double doors into the flurry of Nippy waitresses with their trays, and the blue haze of early morning cigarette smoke.

'Mac' Mackenzie had the natural gift of being so ordinary looking he was virtually invisible in almost any setting. Sally almost missed him sitting, back to the wall, in a corner near the kitchen doors. He could have been anything from a travelling salesman to a professional cricketer, but she knew him as a Scotland Yard Police Inspector, and the toughest training instructor of the war. She joined him quietly and they just sat in silence for some moments until the waitress flittered over and she ordered tea so they wouldn't be interrupted again for a while. The last time they had gone through

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this café-rendezvous routine was in *Le Coq d'Or* in Rouen, ten days before D-Day.

Sally didn't feel the urge to talk. She was happy just to see Mac's face: the face that had screamed at her on the training course at Arisaig, had ransacked half the French countryside to find her when her first parachute drop went badly wrong, and had helped her board the *Lysander* with her arm shot to pieces after the gun battle at Orvault. Mac had always been there when it mattered.

He said. 'Hello, Blondie. You still volunteering to jump out the plane first?'

'I'll let you in on a secret, Mac. I didn't volunteer. The instructors at Ringway made the girls jump out first to make sure the men didn't lose their nerve. Bloody typical, if you ask me. If you're a woman you have to be twice as good as any man just to get a look in.'

'So you *are* still jumping out first, then?'

She grinned reluctantly in agreement. When she'd been a kid her dad had called her 'Trouble'. In SOE they called it 'offensive spirit'.

He reached inside his raincoat and, with the dexterity of a stage magician, produced a pair of black and white photographs six by four inches on the table top. Both showed a round coin-like object.

'What am I looking at?'

'These are blow-ups the lab did for me. The one on the left is your cartridge case. The one on the right is a 9 millimetre parabellum that was fired from a British Sten. You can see the ejector markings are different. On the Sten they're at 9 o'clock with reference to the extractor mark but on the Schmeisser they're at 7 o'clock. Your cartridge was fired from a Schmeisser MP3.'

'Thanks, Mac. I felt sure that was the case.'

'Want to tell me what this is all about? I know the top floor at the Yard is having kittens. Meetings night and day and a press blackout.'

'I want to tell you but I can't. All I can say is I've been called back for something big and I'm up against it.'

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‘And you want me to watch your back again?’

‘I need your help now more than I’ve ever needed it before.’

‘If it’s that bad, maybe we’d better take a stroll along the Embankment – just in case.’

They rose from the table just as the waitress arrived with her tea. Sally apologised and paid her, over-tipping her out of a sense of guilt. They walked down Villiers Street, beside Charing Cross station, to the Embankment and walked slowly beside the Thames, past the granite monolith of Cleopatra’s Needle, towards the pale arc of Waterloo Bridge – just another couple enjoying a stroll in the morning air.

Sally stared at the greasy grey ribbon of the Thames, looking for a place to begin. ‘Before I say anything more I’d better tell you that I’ve looked at some classified files I shouldn’t have. I could get into big trouble, which means if I tell you then you’re in it too. I’m talking about official secrets. Remember those letters they made us sign when we were recruited?’

‘More serious than people trying to kill us? Because that’s what the Gestapo were trying to do, as I recall.’

‘You can joke about it, Mac, but this is serious. I need your help and advice – but I can only tell you half the story, so you’ll be helping me blind.’

‘Shall I tell you what I’ve been doing for the last two years? Sitting behind a bloody desk looking at forensic reports and saying “yes sir, no sir, three bags full, sir.” And wishing someone would throw a bomb through the bloody window, so I could have something to do for a change.’

‘Careful what you wish for.’ Sally laughed dryly.

She paused as they passed the man selling the early editions of the *Evening News*, *Star* and *Standard*. Mac bought a copy of the *Star* and flicked to the racing on the back page. While he held it open, Sally read the downpage story on page one, ‘IRA terror plot foiled in Yard swoop’, and wished it were true.

‘I’ve been tasked with going through the files in Broadway looking for suspects.’

‘Sounds routine. Where’s the problem?’

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‘That cartridge case you identified – they’re saying it could come from several weapons, including a British Sten . . .’

‘You and I have seen them and fired them both. The cases are ejected out the top of a Schmeisser, not out the side like a Sten. I could be wrong but I doubt it.’

‘I doubt it too. Everyone else is looking for Russians or Zionists. I think we’re looking for Germans. Don’t ask me to prove it because I can’t yet, but I’m guessing there are some of them who think the war is not over yet and are planning a comeback. And we’ve only got days to stop them.’

He frowned. ‘So tell me why you’ve looked up your old uncle Mac.’

‘In Broadway, there’s a section of the registry that’s locked away from everyone – and I mean everyone. Even Clement Attlee couldn’t get in there unless the Chief okays it, only the Chief isn’t going to okay it.’

‘Why do I get the feeling you know what’s in there?’

‘It’s dynamite, Mac. . .’

‘You and I have handled plenty of that.’

‘This is different. First of all there is – or was – a radio intercept station code-named ‘Bletchley’. I don’t know exactly where it is or if it’s still in operation. But they not only intercepted Jerry traffic – they were able to decrypt it as well. You remember that cypher machine we were always told to look out for? Like a typewriter with an extra set of lamps? Made by the Enigma company? Well, here’s the thing: they could read the traffic from it.’

Mac stopped, stood motionless and stared at her. For a moment he was speechless. ‘Bloody ‘ell. I didn’t see that one coming.’

‘Neither did Jerry. Because they all used it – including the High Command and Wehrmacht HQ - and they kept on using the same machine all the way through to the end of the war they were so convinced it was secure. It seems we read the lot – including Hitler’s orders. We knew everything before they knew it themselves.

‘The whole Registry is like Aladdin’s cave’, She said. ‘It’s got every radio message of the war on file – it’s even got the

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messages you and I sent back from France. It's an odd feeling seeing our radio sends like that. Like we've become history ourselves.'

'You said "first". What's second?'

Sally glanced along the pavement ahead and behind. Commuters were still arriving at work and a light rain had started. She leaned in to Mac so her lips were just inches from his ear. 'Second is the bit we should not know. You remember they told us every German spy who entered Britain in the war was captured and either turned or executed? That not one Jerry agent made it? That was just propaganda. Keep the home front happy. There was one big Jerry spy right at the heart of Whitehall. They called him "Felix" and he kept Hitler and Himmler up to date with everything he found out – including the secret work on the atomic bomb.'

The colour slowly bled from Mac's face. 'How did they get onto him, if they couldn't identify him?'

'They read the decrypted transcripts of his reports once they'd reached Berlin, through this Bletchley signals station. But they were stuck with him. To arrest him would have tipped off the Jerries we could read their machine cyphers.'

Mac considered this for a few moments. He stopped and looked across at the gleaming white County Hall building on the south bank. 'Why is this man of interest to you now?'

'Because he's still in place, in Whitehall. And I think he could be one of the people we're looking for – or knows who they are.'

'But the war's over. There's nothing to stop MI5 and Special Branch from lifting him now.'

'That's part of the problem. This Bletchley station is still in operation, or somewhere like it. They're still decrypting overseas radio traffic, only now it's not the Germans, it's the Swedes, the Dutch, the Spanish, probably the Russians too. They're all using the Enigma cypher machine. So Felix is still loose and is still sending reports – but to who? Here's my guess: it's the same person half the British Army is hunting. In fact it's more than a guess. I'm sure of it. But nobody bloody listens to me because I'm only a bloody woman.'

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Mac was stunned. ‘You’re going to have to report this. You’ve got no choice.’

‘How? I can’t report any of this without admitting I’ve read the files and broken the official secrets act. I’m up the creek.’

Mac stopped and leaned on the parapet overlooking the Thames. Sally followed him and leaned an elbow on the parapet. He spoke so softly Sally read his lips. ‘Could you identify Felix? Did they try during the war?’

‘The decrypts identify the man he was reporting to in Germany. An SS General called Franz Kammler. All I know about him is that he was in charge of V-weapons development. He was Himmler’s right hand man. He died in 1945. So Felix must have a new master now – and we have no idea who or where.’

‘You say that in the ordinary SIS Registry – the part you’re allowed to see – you found files with the radio reports you and I sent?’

‘Almost all of them. I was quite flattered to find they’d all been neatly initialled, circulated and filed away. It seems we did do some good.’

‘Well, we did win, didn’t we? But what I’m thinking is that if there is a legitimate reason for our reports to be in the SIS registry, why don’t you just make up one that points to your man; put a fake report from me in the registry and then “discover” it. If I’m questioned about it, I’ll back you up – tell them I remember it and was surprised it wasn’t acted on – something along those lines. That way you can legitimately report it and get some action.’

She shook her head. ‘That won’t work. All reports filed in the registry are also entered into a registry log. There’s no chance of altering that. Your fake report wouldn’t have been logged in. Pity. It’s a great idea.’

They trudged on, Sally thrusting her hands into her coat pockets as a faint grey mist drifted along the Thames. They walked past steps to a floating pier where a placard announced ‘Boat Trips to Westminster’ and a youngster in a cap and jumper said, ‘Fancy a trip? Always room for two more aboard.’

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Sally stopped and pointed back to the lad and his placard.
'But that might work.'

'What might?'

'Finding one of your genuine reports with room for a couple of extra paragraphs.'

Mac looked sideways at her and grinned. 'All you need now is a typewriter, Blondie.'

Nine

At 21:00 hours Sally arrived at the Chief's office to attend the Situation Report meeting demanded in his telegram. The Chief's secretary, the fastidious young Lieutenant, asked her to take a seat while, from inside, she could just make out the voice of Colonel Stanhope giving a summary of the day's searches by his teams to the Chief and his deputy, Sinbad Sinclair. With a door separating her from his imperious manner, she had to admit it was an attractive, authoritative voice. In the field, a man with command like his would have impact.

She couldn't sit still. She paced, up and down as the secretary scribbled his initials across a pile of documents. With each pass of the desk her eyes bored into the impervious face of the Lieutenant.

As she waited, her frustration wore off. From what little she could hear, the field teams' reports sounded meagre, meaning the men inside would be hungry for news. But waiting also gave her the unwelcome opportunity to reflect in more detail about the crime she was about to commit, and the fact she was about to deliver to her superior officers inescapable evidence of that crime in the red cardboard folder she held.

She had spent more than an hour searching the *Monocle* file looking for a suitable report from Mac to which she could make her own subtle additions. Captain James kept turning to glance at her, almost as though he could read her malign intentions. She needed a report with space enough for her to make additions, but it also had to be from a plausible date around the end of March 1945 when the last V2 rocket fell on London. She had to settle for a report from early

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April, and planned to blame the date discrepancy on a delay in getting the intelligence from the field. She waited until James answered a call of nature and carefully removed the carbon copy from the file.

She had been able to fake everything else without much trouble. She commissioned Danny Jacobs to ‘borrow’ one of the office typewriters, a Remington Noiseless as favoured by Number 10, and deliver it to Earl’s Court. She followed the same layout and style of the existing report. She had even used several sheets of carbon paper and an extra bottom sheet to give a little fuzziness, as in the real file copies.

The only weak point of her forgery was that Mac’s report had a series of ticks in ink against the set of initials of those to whom copies had been originally circulated as well as other handwritten notations, including one by the Chief. This document had already been through his hands.

When the fastidious young lieutenant finally said, ‘You can go in now, ma’am,’ it was long past 22:00. She could tell at once from the brittle atmosphere she had been right about the lack of progress in the field, but wrong to think this would make them more receptive.

‘Well, what have you got, Honeychurch?’ Stanhope barked, running a hand through his hair.

Breathe in. Focus. ‘It’s a field report from April 1945, sir. From Agent *Monocle* of F Section – my old SOE outfit. *Monocle* had received reports from one of his most reliable resistance contacts in Paris about a conversation between the head of the SS in France, Franz Kammler, and his deputy.’

Menzies exchanged a glance with Sinclair. He leaned slightly forward in his chair.

‘And what exactly was this conversation?’

Sally removed the transcript from her red folder and read, ‘Kammler reported as saying: quote We have fired our last [illegible] rocket at London today. Allies will overrun our last launch site in 24 hours unquote. Reply: Quote: You still have your man in Whitehall, General. Isn’t he worth a hundred rockets?’

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Unquote. Kammler reply: Quote Felix is the [illegible] loyal agent we have but even he can't help us with the military situation as it is unquote.'

Stanhope looked baffled. 'What the hell use is that supposed to be? I keep telling you the war is over. People like Kammler are either in prison or sweeping the floor in an Argentine tractor factory.'

Menzies stood and held out his hand. 'Let me see that report.'

Sally handed him the flimsy sheet. As she did so she added, 'It doesn't seem to have triggered any warning bells at the time, sir.'

After skimming through the report, Menzies looked up and said, 'What you're saying is you think this is an inside job?'

Sally chose her words carefully. 'I think it's possible whoever we're looking for might have had inside help, sir. It could explain how they've evaded us so completely, so far.'

Stanhope gave an exasperated sigh. 'I really don't see how this helps, even if it's true. The only thing that matters is getting hold of the people who took the crates and stopping them. We can work out the why and wherefore of their politics later.'

Menzies handed the report to Sinclair for him to read. 'Very well, all we can do for the present is carry on looking with everything we've got. Let me have another report at 09:00 hours tomorrow, Colonel.' As they all turned to leave Menzies said, 'Just one moment, Honeychurch.'

Sally returned and stood in front of his desk. The Chief stared at her, his face devoid of emotion until Stanhope had left and the door closed behind him. Menzies said, 'I have a pretty good memory and I don't recall seeing that field report, or any mention of a German spy. How do you think something so important escaped my attention?'

Sally could feel her cheeks burning but strengthened her resolve. 'I suppose it came so late in the war, sir. It was practically all over by April wasn't it?'

Menzies studied her for another long moment. Sally held his eyes. Finally he spoke. 'Yes – maybe. Or it was misfiled. Either way

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there will have to be some enquiries made. I still have to answer to the Foreign Office for any irregularities in our work.'

'Understood, sir.'

'And I must impress upon you the content of that document is *Most Secret* and must not be repeated to anyone under any circumstances. Clear?'

'Crystal, sir.'

'Let's say you've made a *prima facie* case for involvement of people other than the Russians and Zionist terrorists Stanhope is hunting. I haven't enough evidence to divert his efforts but you have my permission to continue your – let's say, unorthodox avenue of enquiry. But I've got to see some concrete results. And now – not next week.'

'Then I'll get onto M.I.5 right away, sir. To see what they can tell me about the Jerry spy.'

Menzies pressed his lips together. 'They may help you or they may not. But I must repeat I can't keep covering for you unless you come up with something solid. Report to me tomorrow.'

Ten

Sally waited in the Alvis, parked outside Leconfield House as the rising sun streamed between the rooftops and chimneys of Park Lane, into Curzon Street. She had hoped that parking so ostentatiously outside MI5's headquarters would set some kind of alarms ringing but no-one seemed to be on duty at 6:30 and no official showed up to tell her to move on.

She had tried phoning ahead both last night and again this morning but both times received the same reply that the man answering her call was a duty officer only and that unless her call involved waking the Prime Minister and Chiefs of the Imperial General Staff personally, she should call back in office hours. She had heard about the 'gentlemanly ways' of 'The Office' but was stunned the old school habits were being observed in the current emergency.

At 7:30 the main doors were unlocked by an overweight doorman with hands the size of cabbages. To her cheerful good morning she received only a grunt.

She followed him into the building and handed him her SIS pass as he sat down in his wooden cubby hole. He sprang to his feet again with surprising agility for a man his size, looked from her to the pass and back several times and asked, 'What are you doing here, miss? You're in the wrong building.'

'I urgently need to speak to a senior officer on a matter of great importance. I'm acting on orders from my Chief.'

'I'll see if the duty officer is available miss. We don't get many young ladies here.' He turned to the telephone on the shelf

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behind his seat and tried two extensions without success but got through on the third.

The banging of double doors from inside the building came closer until a young man in civilian clothes appeared in reception. He looked as though he was straight out of Officers Training Corps and was growing a feeble military moustache in an attempt at compensation. He examined her pass from Menzies' office, and she recognised his voice as the person answering her phone call earlier. He clearly didn't know what to make of her, or her request to speak to someone senior regarding a wartime German spy. He admitted her into the building, but only as far as a small interview room with a table and two chairs. She had a brief glimpse of a warren of narrow corridors and small offices before the young man left and closed the door.

She sat, the electric clock above the door ticked, measuring out the seconds. She jumped to her feet in frustration and was about to open the door when an older, more senior officer arrived. He introduced himself without giving a name. Her mention of Menzies and SIS garnered no response. Then she mentioned 'Felix'. His attention was arrested immediately. 'Where did you hear that name?' he demanded. She repeated her story about the *Monocle* file and he said nothing but listened grim-faced. When she finished he turned to the telephone on the window ledge and made a succession of calls. In the first he lent on the window ledge with his elbow. In the second, he straightened up. In the last, he stood erect with his thumb in line with the seam of his trousers. He replaced the receiver and gave her directions to a flat in Dolphin Square, Westminster, where he told her she would be met by a Major Maxwell Knight. He said the name slowly, then repeated it with reverence.

Sally left Leconfield House, retrieved the Alvis and cut down Curzon Street to Berkeley Square. The early morning streets were still slick with light overnight rain. Fifteen minutes later she was pulling into Dolphin Square, the block of red brick flats stretching endlessly along the Thames Embankment in Pimlico, near Westminster. The apartments, built just before the war, were home

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to Members of Parliament, peers of the House of Lords and – she now learned – served as an outpost for the intelligence services.

The man who opened the door to her knock was quite unlike the intelligence people she was used to dealing with. Tall, fifty-ish, still good-looking, with a prominent nose, Maxwell Knight, looked more like a ballroom dancing instructor than an intelligence officer. He greeted her courteously, and held the door open for her to enter.

The apartment was spacious but looked and smelled like a pet shop. Lizards, newts and other living specimens crawled in glass tanks on the book shelves of his office. The space that wasn't occupied with wildlife was lined from floor to ceiling with books on bird-watching and other nature pursuits. On the corner of an oversized and cluttered desk, a white mouse trotted energetically inside a bamboo wheel. On the shoulder of his tweed jacket was perched a white parrot which raised its poll at her intrusion.

The sitting room into which he showed her had two large casement windows looking out over the garden square around which the apartments had been built. He took a comfortable armchair by the windows and indicated with an outstretched hand that she should take the other.

'I had a call from the Office telling me about your enquiry. I understand you're asking about a Nazi spy named "Felix",' he said amiably, in the tone of voice one might discuss the mating habits of the cuckoo.

She sat forward in her seat. 'It's rather an urgent matter, sir. I need to try to identify this man, if humanly possible, and I've got no time at all to do it.'

'You work for "C", I believe?'

'That's right, sir.'

'Is this in connection with the business at Hay's Wharf? The warehouse raid?'

Sally hesitated. 'Excuse me, sir. May I know your connection with MI5?'

Knight smiled professionally. 'Don't let all this put you off.' He waved an arm at the shelves of books and the glass tanks, 'it happens to be an interest of mine in my spare time. From nine to

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five I am responsible for counter espionage in Great Britain. And I have been briefed about the emergency. At this moment every one of my men and every watcher in the firm is out pounding the beat in the company of red berets and policemen from Scotland Yard. Although I understand they've drawn a blank so far. I haven't actually seen any reports yet.'

'I'm afraid what you've been told is correct, sir. Special Branch visited the site of the attack and found radioactivity in the warehouse where the crates were lodged as well as in the hold of the ship where they were stored during the voyage here.'

'And who does SIS think is responsible?'

'Most people at Broadway think we're looking for Russians or Zionists, sir.'

'But you think differently?'

'I know the war's over, but I'm convinced there is still a Nazi spy or some Nazi organisation active here and they may be behind this. I also know there was one spy, Felix, who was active in the war and may still be active now.'

'I imagine you're not getting far with that line of enquiry.'

'To be honest, sir, I'm getting nowhere. But my Chief – I mean "C" – has given me permission to follow this up, so that's why I need to know about Felix.'

Knight gazed absently out of the windows to the square where a small flock of starlings was conducting flying manoeuvres in and out of the chestnut trees and the Spanish Gardens. He seemed to be making up his mind about what – or how much – he could say. He produced a silver cigarette case from his jacket pocket and offered her one. Sally shook her head. 'I'm trying not to.'

Knight lit up and said, 'I don't know whether you're aware of this but there's been bad blood between your outfit and mine for some years.'

Sally sensed trouble and merely said, 'I didn't know that, sir, no.'

'It all started with Winston. He thought it would be a good idea if the two services were amalgamated into one. Your boss agreed with him. I rather think he fancies himself as head of it all.'

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Sally shifted in her seat. ‘I’m not involved in office politics, sir. I’m just a member of the poor bloody infantry, doing a job. I’m not really SIS, strictly speaking. I was in SOE during the war. The French section.’

‘How did you get involved with SIS?’

‘I was transferred to the States in 1945 to assist with the Manhattan Project.’

‘I take it that’s why you’re involved now.’

‘That’s right. I was present at Los Alamos. I saw the thing being armed, so I have some idea of what we’re looking for. I also saw it go off so I know what it can do.’

Knight was thoughtful again for a moment. ‘Any relation to Ed Honeychurch, by any chance?’

‘My father, sir. Currently captain of the *USS Saratoga*, in the Med.’

‘Ed and I have sunk a few pink gins in our time. That was back when he was U.S. Naval Attaché at their embassy here before the war. I’m ex-Navy, too. British, of course.’

He paused again but this time was gathering his thoughts rather than deciding whether to trust her. ‘Let me give you a little bit of history. “Felix” is a sore point with us here at MI5. He is the one we missed. Or at least that’s the way the story is told around Whitehall. In fact it was more complicated. A lot more complicated.’

He lit a new cigarette from the embers of the first and disposed of the dying end in the saucer of a potted cactus on the window sill.

‘Before the war even started, one of our undercover agents discovered the existence of a spy at the highest level in Whitehall. We didn’t have a name for him then – a cover name, I mean – and no idea of his real identity, but we had a fix on his contacts both in Nazi Germany and here in Britain. We made our report and to our surprise word came down from on high that we were not to investigate any further. The orders came from Downing Street, from Winston himself, we were told. We naturally drew the conclusion

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that whoever he was, he must be a double agent feeding our fibs to the boys in black at the Abwehr.

‘Later on in the war we started to get whispers from radio intercepts and from bugging the rooms of captured German officers that the mystery man was “Felix” and that he was the golden boy who was going to win the war for the Nazis by telling them everything we did and said.

‘Next thing we knew, the war was over, Hitler was dead and the Abwehr out for the count, but “Felix” was still in business. We demanded to know from your boss what the hell was going on and we got the same message as before. No-one is to touch “Felix”.

‘There’s one thing I can tell you for certain. Whoever he is, “Felix” is mixed up in extreme right-wing circles in this country, and I mean at the very highest level. I’m talking about those who wanted – and still want – to bring the Duke of Windsor back as King and who think Sir Oswald Mosley would make a good Prime Minister.’

Sally leaned forward in her chair. ‘Is there anything at all you can tell me about “Felix”, sir? About how you got onto him in the first place?’

Knight hesitated once more, looking for inspiration out onto the gardens where the starlings were still putting on their air display.

Sally sensed she might be losing her only lead. ‘I honestly believe this could be the break we need to find these terrorists, sir – or I wouldn’t ask. I’m really not part of any turf war between departments.’

‘I didn’t think you were, Honeychurch. You’ve got your father’s openness. It’s really very – attractive. The reason I’m hesitating is that there’s nothing more I can tell you personally that would help. But there is one person who might have something useful and that’s the undercover agent who first rumbled him. She may be able to tell you more.’

‘She?’

‘Yes, she. I’ve been in charge of counter espionage – since 1934 and, unlike some of my colleagues, I’ve always found women agents to be the most effective. I don’t necessarily mean they’re

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better than men, but they can go places and ask questions that would get most men into trouble.'

'That's pretty much why women were recruited into my old outfit, SOE, sir.'

'Is that so? Well we've had some outstanding successes that way, in penetrating both communist and fascist groups in this country and in both cases it was thanks to women. The person I'm going to put you in touch with knows more about right-wing people and pro-Nazi organisations than anyone else. But there is a problem and she can be difficult, so I'd better tell you a bit about her.'

He got up and went to the filing cabinet in the next room, unlocked one of the drawers and took out a brown card file with a red star on the front. He returned to his seat and handed Sally a photograph from the file. It was a studio portrait, taken perhaps for some special occasion, like the start of a new job, but although well-lit and sharp, it was curiously uninformative – almost like a photograph of a photograph, Sally thought. The young woman posing for the camera was undeniably very attractive. She looked straight at the camera with eyes that suggested a will that would be difficult to deflect.

'Vera Richmond,' he said. 'The best undercover agent MI5 has ever had. It was through her we first learned of the existence of the spy we later came to know as Felix – not that it did us much good. But the point I want to impress upon you is that going undercover for long periods in the way Vera did can have long-lasting effects on you – sometimes rather odd effects.'

'I spent more than two years behind enemy lines in occupied France, sir. I know something about the strain on your nerves. I know what it is to get an attack of the jitters and I sometimes felt I was ready for a visit to the funny farm myself.'

Knight was apologetic. 'Of course you know all about this, I was forgetting for a moment. And you must certainly know it can make you think and act in odd ways. Well, Vera became – let's say – exceptionally conscious of her personal security and we both decided she had done more than her bit and it was time for her to retire. The trick-cyclists might call it paranoia, but of course in

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Vera's case she had made a large number of enemies and some of them may well have long memories. She wanted to get clear away from London, but I persuaded her to stay here, where we are only a phone call away and can take action if she should need help. To be honest I also wanted her to stay close because she is still a mine of information.'

Knight looked out the window again. 'Of course, that might have been bad advice, the way things have turned out. But we're all in the same boat now, aren't we?'

'If you could give me an introduction to her, I'd appreciate that very much, sir.'

'I'll give her a call myself and tell her you're coming. I can't guarantee she'll see you – that's up to her. And if she does, you'll have to be patient with her.'

Eleven

Sally peered warily through the windscreen at the increasingly squalid shops and doorways as she approached her destination in the heart of Soho. MI5's star undercover agent from between the wars now lived in retirement among illegal gambling dens, smutty bookshops and open doorways with rows of doorbells and signs reading, 'Walk right up' and 'Adult Entertainment.' A young tout with oily black hair was lounging in a café doorway and crouched down to look inside the car as she drove slowly past looking at door numbers.

She gripped the wheel more tightly and pulled her shoulder bag closer on the seat beside her, thanking her foresight in hanging on to the SOE knuckleduster inside it. Towards the end of the foul parade of shops she found the address Knight had given her. It was a single, closed front door between a continental patisserie and a shop selling books with their covers partly concealed by brown paper.

Sally parked the Alvis and stood for a moment, weighing up the narrow, three-storey building to learn what it said about its occupant. But the blank panes of glass merely returned her stare.

She rang the doorbell, her finger tense, rehearsing what she was going to say to the woman who had penetrated to the very heart of right-wing circles during the 1930s. The lace curtain at the window trembled but her ring remained unanswered. Sally rang the bell again, keeping her finger on the button longer this time. She put her ear closer to the door and heard someone on the other side but it stayed closed.

'Hello? Miss Richmond?'

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From behind the door a coarse, throaty voice spat, 'If you're one of Francisco's people you can tell him from me to fuck off.'

Sally raised a clenched hand to knock but instead crouched down, opened the letter box. 'My name is Sally Honeychurch, Miss Richmond. I was sent here by your old Office. By Maxwell Knight.'

'Are you . . . you on your own?' This time the voice had a pronounced slur.

'Yes, quite alone. I just want to talk to you. That's all.'

'Well you can tell Francisco he can just fuck off.'

The silence that followed suggested Miss Richmond was no longer behind the door.

Sally rang again but heard nothing apart from a distant clumsy rattle of bottle against glass.

She stood, looking up in frustration at the tall narrow front.

She turned and walked back down Old Compton Street, to where the oily black-haired youth still lounged in the doorway. She glanced up at the name above his head to check that her brief glimpse earlier had been correct. The doorway was between a dingy café called 'Francisco's' and the entrance to a flight of stairs. She pulled her shoulder bag closer, and smiled politely to the youth. 'Is there a Mr Francisco in here?'

The youth grinned in a half amused kind of way. 'Francisco? Sure. Sure, darling. You wanna speak to Francisco? I take you.'

He led her up the wooden staircase, the treads worn by decades of after-hours drunken love, past an open-door on the first floor where four overweight young men, like fat over-ripe olives, sat playing Pontoon for pennies. The smell of cigarette smoke, sweat and stale beer wafted through the door as they passed. A couple of faces looked up curiously as the street boy led Sally past, and she slid her hand down the strap and into her bag, her fingers touching the cold brass. She followed him warily further up another flight to an office with a closed door. He knocked and entered without waiting and, her instincts sharpened, her eyes quickly measuring the office and its occupants.

A hard-looking man of fifty, built like a barrel, sat behind a desk in his shirtsleeves, counting grubby one-pound and ten-shilling

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notes into separate stacks on the desk. Beside him, leaning on the desk on his elbows and echoing his count, stood a huge bald-headed man of similar age, bulging in a check suit. Behind them, on the wall was a large black and white photograph of Valetta harbour, Malta.

The street boy announced her with a proprietorial flourish. ‘Eh, Francisco. This lady wanna talk wit you.’ And he stood to one side, arms folded and grinning in anticipation of the coming entertainment.

Francisco courteously rose from his seat to greet her. Sally switched on her non-threatening smile and held out her hand. ‘My name’s Sally Honeychurch.’

He took her hand reverently and bowed slightly. ‘What can I do for you, Signora?’

‘I’m a friend of Miss Richmond who lives down the road at number 129 –’

Francisco rolled his eyes upwards. ‘Ah the crazy lady.’

‘Well, that’s the point, she’s not really crazy. She’s just very nervous and she doesn’t have anyone to look after her – except me.’

Francisco shrugged. ‘She thinks me and my brothers we wanna hurt her, but we no hurt anyone. Honest’. He spread his arms in confirmation. ‘Young Wigi, he offer to help her with her shopping a couple of times, and she shout at him – that’s all. I try to visit the crazy lady. I make nice offer for her house. She hit me with stick. I leave her alone. That’s all. Crazy lady, she think we Mafiosi. We ain’t even Eytalian. We is Maltese.’

‘Mr – I’m sorry, I don’t know your name . . .’

‘Excusi, Signora. Me Francisco Messina. These my brothers.’ He pointed at the young street man, ‘Wigi’. And the bald-headed bull in tweed, ‘Salvatore.’

‘Mr Messina, I know you must be very busy, but it’s very important I speak to Miss Richmond on a very urgent matter. Could I ask you to come with me to her house and explain to her that she has nothing to fear?’

On the desk sat a brass paperweight in the shape of a Maltese Cross. She placed her fingertips on the cross and straightened it. ‘It’s

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really very important, otherwise I wouldn't ask you. And you'd be doing me a great personal favour.'

Salvatore, still leaning on the desk on his elbows, reached across and pushed the paperweight crooked again with a pudgy finger. He said, 'Fuck off, lady. We got business. Do we look like a charity?'

As he spoke she could smell fried onions on his breath. He breathed wheezily, through his nose, the laboured breath of the overweight and unfit. Behind her Salvatore's brother stood silent, no longer smiling, waiting to clock the boss' next move. Sally moved her bag to her left shoulder. She picked up the brass paperweight, braced her feet and then bipped Salvatore on the nose with a short right jab that cracked as it connected. His knees went from under him as he collapsed backwards in slow-motion into the corner with an astonished look on his face, blood spurting from both nostrils.

She put down the paperweight, rubbed her stinging hand. 'Like I say, it's really important, or I wouldn't ask you.'

Francisco stopped smiling and she sensed Wigi's startled reaction as he reached into his inside jacket pocket for what could be a knife or razor. She reached into her bag and brought her fist out wearing the brass knuckleduster. Wigi froze and Francisco held up both hands like the referee in a boxing match. 'Sure. Sure. No problem. Pay no attention to Salvatore – he got no manners.' He slowly reached behind, collected his coat from the back of his chair and began to put on it on. Wigi leaped to open the door, bowing.

Francisco followed Sally back down the street to Miss Richmond's door and stood there, patting his thinning hair into place and straightening his jacket as Sally rang the doorbell. Getting no reply she opened the letter box. 'Hello Miss Richmond. It's Sally Honeychurch again. I've got Mr Francisco with me this time. He wants to apologise to you in person for any misunderstanding. Isn't that right, Mr Francisco?'

'Si, lady. Si'.

Sally could just make out a movement in the shadows in the hall. She prodded Francisco in the back and pointed urgently to the letter box.

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Francisco leaned forward as far as his stomach would allow and yelled at the door. 'Look, lady. Me and my brothers we no mean anything. We like you. We want to help you. Promise. My brother Wigi, he the boy who help you once with your shopping. He nice boy. We like you, honest.'

Sally patted his shoulder. 'Thank you so much Mr Francisco', and gave him a friendly push of dismissal.

Moments later, the door opened a crack and Miss Richmond peered out. Sally recoiled as the sour odour of alcohol and cigarette smoke emerged through the crack. 'Has the Eyetie gone?'

'Yes, I'm quite alone. I just want to talk to you. Maxwell Knight sent me. It's really very important.'

The door opened a little wider and Miss Richmond, cigarette clutched between yellow fingers, peered suspiciously out and looked both ways. Then she opened the door more fully and beckoned Sally inside. As Sally entered the hallway Vera reached across her to replace an object in the hall stand with the umbrellas. It was a cricket bat.

'Can't be too careful. Bloody wogs wanna get me out.'

The dingy hall reeked of booze and stale cigarette smoke. Newspapers, parcels and shopping bags were strewn on the floor. Old coats clustered on the mahogany hall stand, threatening to topple it over. From the stairs, three cats glared at her intrusion. The door to the front room was closed and Vera squeezed past and led her down the hall to the back parlour but stopped in the doorway and hesitated, still muddled with drink.

'Better go in the front room. 'I've got a bottle there.'

Sally looked past her into a back room that was a slovenly mess. Half-eaten food on plates was piled on the table cluttered with old newspapers, unopened letters, clothes and bottles. Empty bottles perched on the mantelpiece and sideboard.

'Don't you have anyone to help you?'

Vera swayed and took a long drag on her cigarette. 'Course I do, darling. I've just let the bloody butler have the day off, thassall. Let's go in here.'

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The small front room into which she led Sally was mainly bare. Against the wall stood an oak drop-leaf table and two dining chairs with brown rexine seats. A monster HMV radiogram occupied the alcove to the left of the chimney breast and a few books and magazines lay on painted wooden shelves in the other alcove.

Vera eyed Sally up. ‘How d’you manage to get that fat eyetie . . .’ then she saw the fresh blood on Sally’s knuckles and cackled out loud. ‘Oh my good God – you hit the bastard. This calls for a real bloody drink. Wait here, you hero.’

She disappeared out the room and up the stairs. Sally took a look at the bookshelves and found old copies of *Picture Post*. On the cover of the top one, Mr. Churchill peered into the distance, using his hands as binoculars, over the question, ‘Victory – and then?’ Under the magazines were a few old books, *Technical Drawing for Beginners*, *Conversational German*, and some pre-war tourist guides.

On the dusty mantelpiece was a clock that had stopped, and a photo in a frame that had been turned down flat on its face. Sally lifted it up. It showed a youthful, attractive Vera, standing among a group of young men, all raising a toast to the camera at some long-ago celebration. Dominating the group was the tall figure of Maxwell Knight.

When she came back into the room, Vera carried a large bottle of Export Black & White whisky and two cloudy tumblers.

‘Don’t look at that for Godssake. That’s just me when I was young and beautiful. Had them all eating out of my bloody hand then. You’d never think so now, would you?’

The dark and mysteriously attractive young woman in the photo had been replaced by a collector for Red Cross charity flag pins. Her mottled face was framed by a mop of grey hair, not entirely successfully kept in place by metal curler grips. She amply filled a simple red and white polka dot dress over which she wore a grubby sheepskin jacket and, on her feet, decaying tartan carpet slippers. The challenging glint in the eyes was still there.

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Vera motioned to the table and they sat. She poured Sally a whisky fit for a hero and awarded herself the same accolade.

‘Here’s to crime.’ She tossed off the whisky in two gulps.

Sally matched her. Vera smiled with delight and refilled the glasses. ‘Don’t get much company these days. No-one worth talking to, anyway. Whassyour name, luvvy?’

Sally told her again.

Vera produced a packet of Capstan Full Strength cigarettes and a book of matches. She lit one, and put the packet on the table. ‘Help yourself, luvvy.’

Sally helped herself, inhaled and fought back the choking fumes.

‘D’you work at the Office? There’s so many new bloody faces these days, I can’t keep up with you all. Not that I see many of the old crowd. Except Max. Thank Max for this.’ – She stood up, hefted the bottle, staggered and refilled the glassed again. She put the bottle down and leaned on the table. ‘Must have had more than I thought.’

‘No, I’m not with what you call ‘The Office’. I was with Special Operations during the last lot.’

Vera poked a cigarette at her and squinted through the smoke. Special operations? Are you one of those birds that jumped out of planes?’

‘I did a bit of that, yes.’

‘Christ. No wonder you punched the Eyetie. Which one did you get?’

‘It was one of the brothers . . .’

Vera went to the bookshelves, rummaged around and found a blue photo album. She returned to the table. ‘Here’s some more interesting ones. Thass me at the Berlin Olympics. And me standing next to Hitler at some do. Used to keep this on my desk in the Office. Gave everyone a laugh. They all called me the Fuhrer.’

‘Vera – can I call you Vera? – I urgently need to talk to you about a German spy named ‘Felix’. Can you remember anyone called that?’

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Vera filled the glasses again, as generously as before. ‘Iss not fair. You’re way behind me.’ She broke out in a smile. ‘Still, you did hit the fat Eyetie. That’s worth something.’

‘About Felix?’

‘I did get a ringy–ringy from Max to say someone was coming but I must have forgotten all about it. Seem to forget a lot bloody things these days. Iss funny – I can remember things from years ago like it was yesterday.’

‘It’s years ago I want to talk to you about. About Felix.’

Vera looked down as though inspecting the worn soles of her tartan slippers and her voice sank low. ‘Sat next to the bastard one night and there wasn’t a thing I could do about it.’

‘You infiltrated their organisation, didn’t you? How did you manage that?’

‘Lessee. I was working as a German teacher for the British Council and they sent me to Berlin in ‘36 as a translator. With the Olympics team. I met all of them, Goebbels, Ribbentrop, Himmler. I met Heydrich and Kammler because they were in the German fencing team.

‘Hitler came to take tea at the British Embassy one afternoon. He ignored all the men and only spoke to us women – he was a real charmer. A ladies man. I did the translation so I stood right next to him.’

‘Pity you didn’t put a bullet in him. It would have saved us all a lot of trouble.’

Vera cackled again. ‘Lessee. It was in Berlin I first met that bloody awful Teddy Buckingham. He was only captain of the British fencing team because he was HRH Edward, Duke of Buckingham, a royal duke and a cousin of the King – they wanted to impress the Germans with some royal connections – although he was very good fencer. He competed against Heydrich and Kammler, the Germans. Even had tea together and I had to translate.

‘Buckingham competed against Kammler? You’re sure.?’

‘Certain, luvvy. By rights he should have been put under lock and key as soon as the war started like Mosley and the rest of them. But he got away with it thanks to his position and his

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connections. As a royal duke he was untouchable. Ironic, isn't it? He's Constable of the bloody Tower of London, where he should have been locked up with the rest of the bastards, but he's the one who got away scot free.'

'Have I got this right? Are you saying the Duke of Buckingham was pro-Nazi?'

'Bloody right, he was. And he knew 'Felix', too. Where was I?'

'You were telling me how you got involved with MI5.'

'Thass right. When we came back from Berlin I got a phone call telling me to come to an address in Oxford Street for an interview.'

Sally laughed, 'I had one of those kinds of interview, too. I've often wondered what would have happened if my French had been lousy or I didn't like loud bangs.'

Vera cackled. 'We'd prolly have just got a postcard saying "we weren't quite right for the job" and heard no more about it. Have another one. Anyway, they took me on and, of course, it was the Office. They'd got agent reports Buckingham and others were setting up a phoney friendship society called the Anglo-German Bond. It had been set up with money from Nazi Germany. Really just a front. They'd set up several other "societies", like the Imperial Friendship League. My boss – thass Max – wanted to get inside them all. He thought the best way was to put women agents on the inside as secretaries.'

'We just waited until they advertised for a secretary and I applied. Course, as I already knew Buckingham from Berlin days, I got the job. Then he made me his personal assistant and then I had access to the lot, including the membership lists. But it was a real strain being under cover like that – trying to remember what I was supposed to know and what I wasn't.'

'What did you have to do?'

'Max warned me they'd test my loyalty. After a few weeks, Buckingham called me into his office one day and said, "Vera, go home and pack an overnight bag. You're going on a little trip to the fatherland" – something along those lines. I was sent by aeroplane to

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Berlin the next day. I'd never been on one before. I 'spect you've been on a lot of 'em. Did you fly them yourself? No, course not – you had to jump out, didn't you.'

Anyway it was all done in a big rush, I barely had time to ring the Office. When I arrived in Berlin I was met by a couple of nasty-looking types at Templehof and they took me to a small hotel on the outskirts. They told me I had to wait there until I was contacted.

'Kicked my heels there for three bloody days with only one change of clothes. Then a man knocked on my door and showed me a Gestapo pass. Name of Kohler. Very dodgy looking. I know you shouldn't judge a book by its cover but this bloke had nasty bastard written all over him. He pushed his way into the room.

'I wasn't too happy about it but I'd done the unarmed combat course and I had a cosh in my bag, so I just kept my eye on him. He closed the door then started pulling money out of his pockets and piling it on the bed. It was wads of one pound and five pound notes – thousands of pounds. Then he just picked up half a dozen notes and pocketed them. He said, "For my trouble". Then he tried to stuff a couple of notes down the front of my dress. So I tapped him on the ankle. He didn't like that. I don't s'pose a woman had ever talked back to him, let alone hit him. But he limped off.'

'Had no bloody idea what I was supposed to do next with all this money. What if I was robbed? How would I explain it? Couple of hours later, I had a note telling me to pack, and go to Templehof where there would be a ticket waiting for me on the next London flight. Had to leave half my stuff behind to get all the cash in my suitcase. When I got to customs at Croydon, I found one of our boys from the Office on duty as a customs officer. He took me into the interview room and he opened my case and changed a couple of the notes for ones he'd brought with him, so they'd have samples to examine, and made a note of the numbers.

'When I got outside the terminal, there was Teddy's chauffeur waiting for me in his Rolls Royce and I got driven back to Bloomsbury feeling like royalty. Teddy was overjoyed when he saw the cash I'd brought. He slipped me a fiver as a thank you. But I felt

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I had to turn it in to the Office in case it was important, worse luck. And after all that trouble.'

Sally refreshed their glasses. 'And how did you come to meet "Felix"?''

'He was my biggest flop. By the time we realised there was a bloody Jerry spy active in Whitehall it was too late for me to do anything. We were then told that bloody Felix was to be left well alone. No explanation, then or later. We had to assume that he was feeding the Nazis fabrications, although we had no way to verify that. We just had to take it on trust and carry out our orders. Would you like to borrow a coat luvvy? It can get so bloody cold this time of year.'

'Can you please tell me everything you can remember about Felix – even the smallest scrap of information could be vitally useful.'

Vera looked longingly at the nearly empty bottle of whisky on the table and pulled her sheepskin coat tighter. She looked as though she were fading.

'Have you eaten anything today?'

'Haven't done much shopping lately. I don't seem to have the time for everything like I used to.'

'I think you need some hot food inside you, Vera – let's go and get some lunch.'

'Can we go to the Coach and Horses? I need a drink.'

'They won't be open yet. Let's get some proper food. There's a French restaurant a couple of doors away, we'll go there.'

Vera looked shocked. 'I'm not eating foreign muck.'

Twelve

Sally managed to get her through the door of *Chez Auguste* despite the name, with the solemn promise of English food. It was too early for the lunchtime regulars and the place was empty apart from the two of them.

It was the kind of place where secrets had changed hands during the war; where French paratroops had awed English girls over wine and cigarettes. The only sign now of urgent wartime romance and secrecy were the fraying red banquettes around the walls and worn paintwork. The exotic atmosphere was provided by murals of far off places with mountains and blue seas.

Sally found a discreet table at the back where Vera devoured omelette and chips. She gave in and asked the waiter for a packet of Gitanes which she sat smoking as Vera ate. She had vowed never to touch French fags again but it seemed unfair fate should bring her to one of the few places in London she could buy them, and not indulge the habit she had acquired in countless action planning meetings in French bars and isolated cellars. The powerful smell of the fire cured ‘gypsy’ cigarettes was the scent of golden afternoons, lying in bed with beautiful Alain, wreathed in bedclothes, sunbeams streaming through the writhing blue smoke.

Out of nowhere, Vera said, ‘Teddy Buckingham wouldn’t like that. Wouldn’t like that at all. He can’t stand the filthy habit.’

Why is she telling me that? The strong tobacco seemed also to have dislodged some powerful memory of Vera’s but Sally didn’t probe. She wanted to keep her focussed on ‘Felix’. Vera placed her knife and fork together, drank back the last of her black coffee and pronounced the meal ‘bloody delicious’. Sally ordered two more coffees.

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‘That German, Kammler. He came over here. There was loads of diplomatic activity in summer 1939. It’s all been forgotten about now but there was even talk of a London Peace Conference and a European settlement. Hitler would have come himself. Kammler came on a mission from Hitler. He met Lord Halifax at the Foreign Office, and Chamberlain in Downing Street. Then he went to a reception in his honour at the Guildhall hosted by Teddy Buckingham. I was brought in as the translator on that one.’

‘Next night, quite late, I was called out for a special meeting at the Anglo-German Bond HQ in Bloomsbury between Kammler and some man. I didn’t know at the time exactly what the conversation was about because I didn’t know what the words meant. It was only in 1945 when we all heard about the atom bomb I realised that must have been what they were talking about. All I knew at the time was he must be a spy.’

‘Is there any chance you could recall what was said at that meeting?’

‘I can tell you exactly what was said. Only you’ll have to keep your gob shut about it. Max wouldn’t like it if word got out. I’m his golden goose, you see.’

Vera opened both locks on the door to the house in Old Compton Street, and led the way into the front room. She knelt down before the cupboard under the bookshelves in the alcove, unlocked it, and rummaged inside. She pulled out a Sten gun wrapped in yellow wax paper and placed it carefully on the shelf. ‘It’s just to be on the safe side. I did make quite a few enemies.’

‘What the hell else have you got in there, Vera?’

She answered by piling spiral-bound reporter’s notebooks beside the Sten. ‘Shouldn’t be too difficult to find because it was just before the war started, in July 1939.’

‘Look, Vera. Isn’t this ever so slightly dodgy? I mean . . .’

‘Oh, totally dodgy. Completely against official secrets to keep them, but I knew it would be all right because no-one else can read them. They’re not Pitman’s Shorthand, you see – they’re in Vera Richmond’s special spidery shorthand.’ Her eyes screwed up

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as her shoulders shook with wicked laughter. ‘Just between the two of us, the Office has called on me to refresh their memories quite a few times since the war. You’re not the first, luvvy – not by a long chalk. I’m the unofficial registry. But don’t forget. It’s our secret.’

She held up a blue-covered reporter’s notebook gleefully. ‘Here we are. July to September 1939.’ She flicked through half a dozen pages and found the entry.

‘Here it is, “BLS – F.28.7.39/21:15 – EB.FK.UKM.+VR”

‘That’s my way of saying the meeting took place at Bloomsbury Square, on Friday 28 July 1939 at 9:15 p.m. and those present were Edward, Duke of Buckingham, Franz Kammler, an unknown male, and yours truly.’

Sally glanced at the page Vera offered to her, but saw nothing but a meaningless set of squiggles. She said, ‘Please read it to me.’

Buckingham: This is SS General Kammler. He’s made this trip specially to meet you. He will be the pipeline for all your messages from now on –

Unknown: It is a great honour, Herr General –

Kammler: It’s best we keep this as short as possible, so just answer yes or no, unless there is anything important you have to add.

Unknown: Nods.

Kammler: Have they replicated the experiments of Hahn and Strassman?

Unknown: Yes, Herr General.

Kammler: Do their results agree with our figures?

Unknown: Yes, they do.

Kammler: Do they think a weapon is possible?

Unknown: Yes, sir. Peierls and Frisch are urging the Cabinet to begin development. It’s likely they have received intelligence from their friends in Germany about the Uranverein.

Kammler: Are the Americans involved?

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Unknown: Officially no, of course. But, in secret, yes. Compton has calculated that, with a uranium and heavy water reactor running at 100,000 watts for six months Germany could have a weapon by the end of 1942. So the American government is secretly pumping money into British development using uranium from Canada.

Kammler: So, we are in a race. This is exceptionally valuable information. I will see the Führer hears it as soon as I return

Unknown: I believe I will be in a position to monitor progress and keep you informed on a regular basis.

Kammler: Excellent. Use the Ministry Of Information channel. The same paper as before. And the *Jornado do Rio de Janeiro* in an emergency.'

Vera closed the notebook. 'That's all, luvvy. Anything else they said was out of my hearing.'

'Did you hear the unknown man's name used? Was it Felix?'

'Far as I can recall there were no names used. That name cropped up later – from radio intercepts, I was told. Material sent to Kammler.'

'Did you get a look at him? Could you describe him?'

'Not what you'd call a good look. The lights were always dim in that bloody place anyway. He was just average looking. He was nervous, I remember that, but then he would be, wouldn't he? He must have been English or I'd have noticed.'

'Can you think of anything that might help me identify him?'

'Some kind of expert. The questions he answered were all technical and he knew his stuff. He must also have been pretty senior to have access to classified information – although that doesn't always follow. We had one agent on our payroll who was an ambassador's valet. All he had to do was steal keys and open the safe.'

'So, based on that meeting, it looks like the Anglo-German Bond was a front Edward Buckingham was using to pass information to an enemy.'

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Vera nodded, ‘That’s about the size of it – although in July 1939 we were still technically at peace with Germany, what with Chamberlain’s and his “piece of paper”. He was very clever, our Teddy.’

Sally wondered, ‘What’s this Ministry Of Information channel Kammler talks about?’

‘We worried about that for a long time. In 1939 the government set up the MOI in London University’s Senate House – you know, that tall building in Malet Street. It was a central press office for British and foreign reporters from allied and neutral countries to get official press releases, write their stories and phone or cable them to their papers. It was potentially trouble because it had up to 200 reporters at a time, and it was packed every day. Max and the directors were worried about leaks from it.’

‘Did the reporters have to be accredited?’

‘Bloody right. They’d never have got through the door without a pass. We vetted them all down to their fingertips, especially the so-called ‘neutral’ press. But they were all clean. The bloody war cabinet was more nervous about British reporters who might stir up trouble criticising the government than any of the foreign correspondents.’

‘Their cables going abroad were vetted?’

‘Every line. We even gave the censors lists of words to watch out for, but they never turned up anything. As I said, Whitehall was more concerned over stories about drunkenness among soldiers on leave than they were about real spies.’

‘The one hole we were able to stop up was the emergency channel to the Brazilian newspaper *Jornado do Rio de Janeiro*. We simply refused their correspondent a pass, on a series of pretexts. The poor bloke never found out why, and he may well have been completely innocent.’

‘So how would Felix have worked this channel?’

‘He could have set up a legitimate cover identity before the war as a foreign correspondent or freelance for some obscure newspaper in Spain or somewhere and used their editorial office as a drop, sending via a cable code. Or he could have simply paid a lot of

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cash to a legitimate foreign correspondent to send his doctored cables.’

‘Was there an official list of accredited correspondents I could look at?’

‘Yes, there would definitely have been a list for vetting – but there would be four or five hundred names on it, and most of them will have gone back to the own countries once the war was over –’

Sally leaped to her feet, her face flushed, ‘Yes. They would have gone home after the war, unless –’

Vera finished her sentence for her. ‘–They had a very good reason to stay behind.’

The two women locked eyes. Sally said, ‘I am right aren’t I? If Felix stayed behind here *after* the war, then his contact man would have stayed behind too?’

Vera nodded enthusiastically. ‘They would have been mad to try to change a communication channel that had taken so long to put in place and had worked so well.’

‘You’ve given me my first solid lead, Vera. Can I get hold of that list of foreign correspondents?’

‘I’ll phone Max at the Office and ask him to get it for you. But I think you’ll need all the reporters, the British ones as well as the foreign ones. There were plenty of our own journalists who were very right-wing – and still are. You’re still looking for a bloody needle in a bloody haystack – it’s just a smaller haystack.’

Thirteen

As she walked up the street steps to the flats in Earl's Court, Danny Jacobs appeared at her elbow and handed her a large manila envelope. He had been waiting for her in the RAF Vauxhall at the kerbside.

'Excuse me, Ma'am, they told me to deliver this into your own hands.' Below her name was written 'Box 500, London', the address of MI5.

'Thanks, Danny. Can you get yourself a tea and stick around? I think I'm going to need you later.'

Once she was inside her flat, she fished a kitchen knife from a drawer and slit the envelope open. It was from the registry at Leconfield House. It held a dozen Mimeographed sheets containing a typed list of the journalists who had been accredited to the Ministry Of Information in 1939 and afterwards during the war.

As Vera Richmond had warned, there were hundreds of names on the list. But her task was made easier because correspondents from overseas newspapers were listed separately on the last two pages, and each name was accompanied by notes added by MI5 watchers or investigators. She soon worked out that ticks in ink meant they had been vetted, cleared and accredited to be able to send cables abroad via the censors at Wormwood Scrubs. A line through their name meant they had returned to their home countries when the MOI was wound up after VE Day and were no longer accredited here.

The only foreign correspondents on the list who had stayed on after the end of the war were six from the United States, two

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from Canada, two from France and one each from Portugal, Spain, Sweden, and South Africa.

She put the names of reporters from allied countries aside for the time being and looked more closely at those from supposedly neutral countries. The obvious suspects were the reporters from Spain and Portugal, both countries with plenty of journalists broadly sympathetic to the Nazis. But she reasoned they were too obvious – they would have been investigated in minute detail. And the Abwehr – German intelligence – would not be so foolish as to entrust a sensitive and important mission to such obvious suspects.

She turned her attention to the remaining two, the South African, Cornelis De Witt from Capetown, and the Swedish correspondent, Gerhard Carlsson from Stockholm. South Africa had been an ally in the war, thanks to Prime Minister Smuts' Union Party, but there were plenty of people in South Africa of German descent and plenty of opposition to the war from them. Sally felt justified in subjecting De Witt to closer scrutiny.

It looked as if the MI5 officer who had compiled the list seven years earlier must have gone through very similar thought processes to her own because the most detailed notes he or she had made appeared under the names of these two journalists.

The South African, De Witt, seemed to be mainly interested in industrial stuff, filing stories about ball bearing factories and railway production figures. On the other hand, he also seemed very sedentary, rarely venturing far from his office in High Holborn, according to the watchers' reports, and depending mainly on recycling press handouts. Hardly the acts of an enterprising espionage agent.

The Swedish reporter, Carlsson, was very different. He wrote about anything and everything. His range of interests seemed limitless by comparison to his South African counterpart – from shipping to weather, and from politics to wild flowers. Sally's intuition began to stir at this wide range of interests. Perhaps it would make sending a coded message easier, and harder to spot?

She looked at the last page of the list and found a typed name and signature, 'V.J.M. Osborne' and an extension number. She

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picked up the phone and dialled Leconfield house. She asked the switchboard for extension 214. A woman's voice answered.

'This is Sally Honeychurch. You very kindly sent me your list of journalists accredited to the Ministry Of Information during the war.'

'Yes, ma'am. I've been told to give you every co-operation. What can I do for you – bearing in mind this is an open line?'

'There are two names on the list that interest me specially – I think probably the same two names you were interested in – the South African and the Swedish gentlemen.'

'I know the people you mean.'

'Can you tell me anything more about them? I've got good reason to think one of them could have been actively passing scientific information back to Germany through their work cover.'

'It was me who vetted them at the time and, like you, we were suspicious of neutrals who could be Nazi sympathisers, but we couldn't find anything on either of these two. The South African is very overweight. He walks with a stick and doesn't get around much – in fact he hardly ever stirs outside the office. In the war he only came to the MOI once or twice a month, if that, and spent most of his time in the Lyons Café in Fleet Street eating cakes. So he would have been a very poor choice for someone collecting intelligence.'

'The Swedish man is the opposite. He came to the MOI office every morning, collected any press releases, and took notes. Then he'd submit his cable for vetting and go back to the office. Every day he had the same routine. He'd go to St Martin-in-the-Field and listen to the lunchtime concert, usually Myra Hess. Then he'd walk down the Strand to his office in Fleet Street.'

'We checked with our embassy in Stockholm and his stuff was being published regularly in *Dagposten* and *Aftontidningen* without any alteration apart from what any sub-editor might do to cut a story to fit the page. I managed to sit next to him one day at the lunchtime concert, and engaged him in conversation. He was pleasant, spoke perfect English, showed no sign of nervousness or of expecting to make contact with anyone. We even followed the people who sat either side of him at the concerts, but they were just

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ordinary office workers. So if he was spying for the Nazis, we never found out how he passed anything back to them.’

‘The thing is, he’s still here, isn’t he?’

‘That’s right. We do re-check every so often but he’s never changed his routine once. The concerts have stopped now, but he still walks to St Martin’s every day. He just sits in a pew at the back for half an hour, then walks back to the office. Maybe he’s the religious sort.’

Sally thanked her and sat back in Ma’s armchair with her feet up on the coffee table, pushing a black china cat gently aside with her foot. She read through the list again and again. One of the names in this old file was the conduit passing information from Felix back to Germany. And if he’d stayed behind now the war was over and lost, there must be a compelling reason. It could only be to act as a channel for Felix. And that in turn must mean somewhere there were Nazis still active, still receiving scientific intelligence, still capable of military action.

She abruptly dropped the file on the coffee table, got up and went to the telephone on the window table. She dialled Mac Mackenzie at Scotland Yard.

‘Don’t say anything, Mac, just listen. That idea we talked about? It worked perfectly. In fact it’s worked so bloody well I’ve now got an even bigger problem on my hands and I need the help of Scotland Yard. I’ve set up camp in my parents flat in Earl’s Court Square. Could you get round here? I’ll find a way to make it all right with the powers that be – I hope.’

‘I’ve been waiting for you to call, Blondie. I know you can’t make a move without me.’

‘I’ll send a car for you. It’s Sergeant Jacobs – the para who brought you the cartridge case.’

By the time Mac was delivered, she had dug up Ma’s prized Italian percolator, ground up some precious beans and made a large pot of coffee. ‘It’ll have to be black because I haven’t had a chance to go shopping for milk yet.’

‘Just as well by the sound of it.’

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‘I’m going to stick my neck out and tell you what’s going on. I want you on the inside and I need the help of the Yard.’

He kicked his shoes off, sat back in Captain Honeychurch’s armchair and put his feet up on the Ottoman. ‘Is this to do with the attack in the docks?’

She nodded. ‘The business about an IRA gang and arms smuggling is just the cover story for the press, as I’m sure you guessed. It’s far worse, Mac – as bad as it could be.’

‘You’d better tell me the worst.’

She gave him the quick and nasty version: they’d both seen too much death to bother with wrapping up bad news – even news this bad. But she still saw the blood drain from his face when she told him about the atomic weapon. ‘I knew something pretty nasty was going on, but not this. This is sickening. What are Whitehall doing? Are they going to evacuate?’

‘The experts say it’s not feasible, just starting from scratch with no planning and no preparation. You not only have to transport eight million people, you also have to house them and feed them. We’ve got the buses and trains, but we haven’t got the beds or the food. And we’d have to do it all without starting a panic that will clog every road and railway in London. Imagine D-Day without any planning.’

‘Where are you with the investigation now?’

‘The Paras, Special Branch and MI5 are foot-slogging around every London postal district combing out anywhere that could house a five to ten-ton set-up – that’s how big the thing has to be. I’ll find out later today how far they’ve got but I know it’s not very far. They’re convinced it’s the Russians or Zionist terrorists – and they could be right.’

‘But you’re not convinced.’

‘You know why I first thought Germans are involved. I’ve now found out the Jerry spy in Whitehall was using a foreign news correspondent and I’ve got a couple of suspects – a South African and a Swedish reporter. But no-one can work out which one it is or how they’re communicating. Then, of course there’s the time problem. The scientists say it’s going to take the terrorists several

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days to assemble their bomb but we don't know how long exactly and we've already lost two days.'

'If you can square it with the Commissioner's Office at the Yard, I'll be more than happy to come on board – you know me. What do you want me to do?'

'I need to find a way to force our journalist – whichever one it is – to break cover and lead us to Felix. But we're running out of time. If we had weeks or months . . . but we've got to do something now – today.'

Mac spread both arms in an expansive gesture. 'There's the obvious brute force method – arrest them both and sweat them in a cell. But even that isn't guaranteed to work quickly – if at all.'

'– And the Chief would never sanction torture. Murder perhaps, but not torture, especially as one of them is an innocent bystander. Maybe both of them. It wouldn't be right, even in this situation.'

'So what have you got up your sleeve, then?'

'You remember that time when I left FREELANCE and worked for a few days with the SHOEMAKER network? I was sent in by London because the local people had become convinced they had a traitor. They had no real evidence, but the group leaders thought it was either a lad of nineteen called Philippe or a woman who ran the post office in Limoges. They thought one or other of them was leaking plans to the local Nazis because two previous raids had been betrayed with a lot of casualties.'

'We had to find whoever was betraying the network right away because London wanted a big raid on the ammunition dump in Limoges to coincide with a big push by the Allies. They dared not brief the local group in case the word got out, but the raid was a must.'

'How did you identify the wrong 'un?'

'We called a meeting. It looked like a regular meeting of local people, but we called it with only a few minutes' notice so as to explain why a lot of usual faces were missing. In reality it was just me, the four most important local Maquis leaders and the local doctor, lawyer and priest who were all reliable, and of course the

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two suspects. We laid out a fake plan for a raid on a completely different target – a railway junction miles away.

‘After the meeting we put our best people on shadowing the two of them. They didn’t know it but they were never alone for a second from that moment onwards.

‘It was the kid, Philippe. He seemed all right and he’d begged to join the resistance. Turned out his family was German – from Alsace. The Gestapo had taught him how to make a dead letter drop in the local bus shelter, leaving a cigarette packet in the litter bin.’

‘What did you do?’

Sally picked up her coffee. ‘I did what London told me to do.’ She made a pistol with her empty hand, pointed her index finger at him and pulled an imaginary trigger.

‘Oh. I wondered why you weren’t very talkative when you came back. But how do we use that now?’

‘This is where I need the help of Scotland Yard. If you could get the Commissioner to call a press conference I think we can pull the same trick. We call it at the last minute to explain why there are only 20 or 30 journalists attending. We pack it with MI5 and Special branch people posing as reporters. We get the BBC and a couple of well-known British and American reporters and take them into our confidence. Say Richard Dimbleby and Ed Murrow. We tell them it’s a national emergency and they’re not to print anything – they’re simply there as window dressing to help us trap a spy. I think they’ll be patriotic enough to go along with that. Then we put up the Commissioner to make the announcement. We tell them the Security Service has made the first in a series of major arrests of a spy ring at the highest level in Whitehall with more arrests imminent –’

Mac shook his head. ‘That’s no good. Felix will know it’s not true.’

‘That doesn’t matter. What matters is the crooked reporter will think it’s true and will want try to warn Felix by whatever emergency procedure they’ve cooked up. The only thing that matters is we’ll scare him into acting – only this time we’ll be watching both of them.’

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Mac shifted uncomfortably. ‘There’s a hell of a lot of ‘ifs’ and ‘buts’ in there. What if your targets don’t turn up to your phoney press conference? What if they smell a trap and do nothing? I’ll be asking the Commissioner of the Metropolitan Police to tell a pack of lies to some of the best known journalists in the country. He might not like that.’

Sally got to her feet. ‘If we don’t do something and do it right now, there’s a good chance the Commissioner and everyone else in this city will be blown to bits. He might not like that much either.’

‘You’re right, as usual, Blondie. We can’t just stand around scratching our backsides. I’ll go and see the top floor right away. But I know they won’t stick their necks out and take the lead on this themselves. Not on my say—so. You’ll have to convince your chief to give us the green light. Then my people will follow suit.’

Sally grabbed her coat. ‘I’ve got a progress meeting now in Broadway. You’d better go back to the Yard. I’ll let you know, one way or another.’

Fourteen

The first thing Sally saw when she was admitted to the Chief's office was the beautifully drawn map of London postal districts with a variety of coloured stickers, map pins and annotations. Her heart sank. She knew the army well enough to know the more elaborate and picturesque the chart, the less likely that Stanhope's teams had made any real progress.

As she entered, the Colonel said, 'So the biggest problem areas are the South East districts, especially SE18 and SE7. In Woolwich there's not just the Arsenal and the Dockyards with acres of riverside land and outbuildings, but in Charlton there's a whole string of factories, spread out all along the Thames – Siemens Brothers, Telcon, Harvey's, Elliot's and a dozen others covering hundreds of acres of industrial land. It's a mammoth task. I must have more men.'

Menzies was standing in military uniform, listening attentively. He pointed to the three northern areas cross-hatched in red. 'So what you're saying is at present, it's just NW7, NW12 and N3?'

'Ones completely in the clear, yes sir, but there are a dozen others that will be cleared within a matter of hours.'

Menzies shook his head. 'It's still very slow progress, isn't it? I was expecting more, Colonel. We can only hope it's not too slow. I've got to tell the Cabinet something. What about suspects?'

Stanhope's aide, Major Whitlock handed him a blue card folder thick with typed reports. 'We're focusing mainly on the Russians now. There's been a suspicious increase in wireless traffic

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in the past 24 hours, especially from units in the occupied German zone to Moscow and back.'

They were preparing to end the meeting when Sally spoke up. 'I have made some concrete progress, sir.'

The two men looked sceptically at her, as though it were impossible that anyone without a map with flags could make such a claim.

'With the help of the Security Service, I've established the Nazi spy "Felix" has been sending secret information to his Nazi handlers, including details of atomic bomb developments both before and during the war. I'm convinced finding him could lead us to the people we're looking for.'

Both men looked dumbfounded. It was Stanhope who spoke first. 'And how exactly do you propose to do that, Honeychurch?'

'I think I've worked out how Felix is communicating with his masters, Sir, via the overseas cable network. I have a plan I believe will smoke him out.'

They continued to look uneasy as she outlined her idea, Stanhope impatiently shifting his weight from one foot to the other. When she'd finished, Menzies shook his head. 'I'm sorry. I'm willing to go along with your irregular methods as long as they don't conflict with the military operation or take up manpower resources. But what you're asking would mean tying up dozens of men, just on a hunch. You're asking too much.'

'But this has a very high chance of working, Sir. It's not just trawling through the streets of London playing blind man's buff. This is a tightly focused operation on a specific target.'

Menzies looked at Stanhope. 'What do you say to that Peter?'

'As you know, Sir, I think a systematic search is the only hope of success. This play-acting is too far-fetched for my liking.'

Menzies pointed to the map. 'I'm afraid I agree with the Colonel. This is a military problem and we've got to stick to military methods. I can't authorise your plan. And I'm late reporting to the Cabinet.'

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Menzies picked up his military cap and turned to leave. Sally stepped firmly in front of him. ‘With respect, Sir. At Los Alamos last year, you said you’d trust me with your life. All I’m asking now is that you trust me to prove I can nail this spy. There are eight million lives at risk. All I want is a dozen men. For two hours – or less.’

Menzies sighed. ‘I suppose if there’s anything in this Nazi angle, it should settle the matter one way or another. Do you have any objection in principle Peter?’

Stanhope looked unhappy. ‘If Honeychurch is convinced there’s something in this line of attack, then we’d better give it a try, I suppose.’

‘Very well. I’ve got to tell the Cabinet we’re making progress, even if our wheels are just spinning in the sand. I’ll speak to the Commissioner and request Scotland Yard’s press officer to lay on this press conference for this morning. Let me have a note of what exactly you want said and I’ll get the professionals to draft a press hand-out. I’d better take a look at it as well.’

‘Sir, I do have another request to make. There is a former colleague of mine from the French section of SOE – Mac Mackenzie. He’s now working as a Detective Inspector at Scotland Yard and has full security clearance. He’s the best field man I’ve ever worked with and he would be invaluable on this case. He was SOE’s unarmed combat expert and the man who trained me at Arisaig. I’d like your permission to indoctrinate him on the situation and have him join me in the field.’

‘I can’t see any objection. What about you, Colonel?’

Stanhope was occupied supervising the dismantling of his map. ‘As you know, sir, I think this line of enquiry is a waste of time, but as long as it’s not my time or my men’s time that’s being wasted then I’ve no objections.’

Sally drove the Alvis through the Embankment gates of New Scotland Yard – against the objections of the officer on duty, who stepped out in front of her and held up a warning hand.

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‘Police vehicles only allowed in here, Miss. You’ll have to find somewhere else to park for your hair appointment.’

Sally smiled sweetly at him. ‘My hair’s fine, thanks constable. I’m here to meet Inspector Mackenzie of Forensics. Be a good lad and phone through to him for me, will you?’

By the time she reached the main entrance and the reception area Mac was waiting, the question written on his face.

‘They’ve bought the idea, Mac. We’re on for this morning.’

Fifteen

Sally stood with Mac and Scotland Yard's press officer at the back of the conference room as the first members of the press filed in, picked up the mimeographed press releases from their chairs and took their places. The murmur of voices grew in volume as reporters read the first few lines and began talking among themselves to see if anything further had leaked already on the grapevine.

‘What’s this all about – any idea?’

‘Not a clue, old man. They’re playing this one close to the chest.’

Sally turned to Mac. ‘Not a bad start. All we need now are the two blokes we’ve set this up for.’

The South African, De Witt, arrived early, limping badly, supporting himself with his stick. He smiled gratefully as people in the front row moved over to make room for his considerable bulk in the aisle seat.

As the hands of the wall clock reached two minutes to ten, with no sign of the Swedish reporter, Carlssen, Sally checked herself against casting too frequent glances at the door. But he arrived, breathing heavily at the last minute. He tumbled through the doors along with a BBC Radio sound man carrying a wire recorder and a woman reporter from the *Herald Tribune* returning Sally a favour. Carlssen took a seat inconspicuously at the back, out of the spotlight and well placed for a speedy exit.

Commissioner Scott swept in without delay, accompanied by two senior police colleagues and sat at the green baize table set up at the front of the room for the occasion. He looked even more ghastly than when Sally had seen him two days before, his face grey, his

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eyes ringed with sepia. She had expected him to put up some resistance against making what amounted to a false announcement, but – like Menzies and Stanhope – he had grasped at any tactic that could provide a breakthrough in the face of zero progress. He accepted the script they had prepared for him without question.

‘Let’s hope he doesn’t muck this up,’ Mac said in a quiet voice.

When Scott started reading the paper in front of him it seemed as if Mac’s fears were well-founded. His voice was hoarse and broken and he reached for the carafe of water on the green baize. But the pause while he poured and drank merely added a note of drama that was not lost on his audience and the tension visibly increased.

‘At six thirty this morning officers of the Metropolitan Police Force executed a series of important arrests in the Central London area of individuals, both male and female, suspected of committing offences against the Official Secrets Act 1939, and the Emergency Powers (Defence) Act 1939. Further arrests are expected in the near future. The individuals arrested are currently in police custody and will appear in court to face serious charges later today. We are not releasing the names or any further details of the individuals at this time. However further details will be made known when charges are preferred.’

One of the Special Branch men at the front, posing as a crime reporter, spiral bound notebook poised at the ready, had been primed to ask the first question. ‘Is this a case of espionage, Commissioner?’

Scott hesitated, apparently choosing his words with care. ‘You can take it we are currently engaged in investigating a most serious case of espionage, yes.’

‘Is it connected with the Woolwich Arsenal case?’

‘I can’t comment any further until additional important arrests have been made and charges have been brought.’

Scott concluded by saying ‘That’s all for the moment, gentlemen, but I shall be making a further important announcement at four o’clock this afternoon, which you are invited to attend.’

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Most of those in the room got up immediately and left, as they had been briefed, in a show of returning to their offices to file a story. Carlssen was among those racing for the exit and Sally exchanged a knowing glance with Mac. The South African, De Witt, took his time, heaving his bulk from the chair, rising unsteadily to his feet and limping slowly from the room and the building. He was the last to leave.

‘They’re both covered,’ Mac said, ‘but you and I have got to decide which one to follow if we want to be in at the kill. Who’s your money on?’

Sally shook her head in frustration. ‘It’s even money, Mac. My head says Carlssen, but there’s something weird about De Witt I can’t quite put my finger on. He doesn’t seem to have that hungry edge for an exclusive story most reporters have.’

They decided to wait outside in the Alvis, ready to leave quickly, while a Special Branch sergeant received reports from the nearby telephone point and relayed news to them. One of the two men – the innocent one – would file a report that was untrue and potentially damaging, so they had prepared contingency plans to intercept any press report that was cabled abroad in the next eight hours.

As the phone reports came in, Sally began to form a picture of the two men behaving as they had always behaved. Carlssen returned immediately to his office and typed up a story which he handed to his secretary to take to the Post Office cablegram office in the Strand. It was in their hands within twenty minutes and they passed it on immediately to the cypher experts at Leconfield House for examination. Disappointingly, Carlssen then stuck to his office, making no phone calls or personal visits, showing no signs of panic.

De Witt didn’t go back to his office or interrupt his usual routine. He visited the Lyons Café in Fleet Street for his usual coffee and apple strudel. He phoned no-one, spoke to no-one and sat alone at his usual table.

The phone reports went quiet. Sally started the Alvis and looked at Mac.

‘Which way are you going to jump?’ He asked.

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‘Let’s pay a visit to the Lyons cafe,’ she said, pulling away onto the Embankment.

She parked in Fleet Street and she and Mac walked to the pavement opposite the cafe. They were met by a Special Branch sergeant Mac knew. ‘Your man is sitting at the second table in the window on the left,’ he told them. ‘The manageress says that’s his usual place. He’s done nothing out of the ordinary. He’s contacted no-one.’

Mac dismissed the sergeant and they waited, looking at men’s suits in the Fifty Shilling Tailors window. The cafe was now emptying after the lunchtime rush and they saw the reflection of DeWitt as he heaved himself up, paid his bill and left. He even wasted a few minutes looking at the posters in the window of the travel agent next door. Then he waddled off in the direction of his office.

Mac started walking back to the car. ‘There’s not much point in hanging about any longer. We might as well go back to the Yard.’

Sally hesitated. ‘There’s something about him that’s different from the press conference but I can’t quite put my finger on it. Let’s go in and take a look.’

They sat at the table used by De Witt and ordered two coffees. Mac ran expert fingers over the underside of the table and the chairs but there was nothing added, nothing out of place, no marks on the paper menu or the oilcloth.

Sally sat with her arms on the table before her, feeling tired. As the minutes passed and nothing happened, disappointment rose in her throat and she began to feel queasy. ‘It looks like I’ve wasted everybody’s time, including my own.’ Mac’s head dropped and he slowly shook it from side to side. ‘I suppose we’d better get back to the Yard.’

As they got up to leave, a smartly-dressed young woman came into the café and spoke to their waitress at the cashier’s position. A few words passed between them and they burst into mutual laughter. The waitress walked to the back of the café took down a walking stick from the coat rack and handed it to the young

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woman. Sally and Mac almost fell over each other, leaping to intercept her.

‘Just one moment, Miss,’ Mac said producing his warrant card. ‘Who’s walking stick is that?’

The girl was startled and her face changed from laughter to bewilderment. ‘I’m not stealing it or anything. I’m just collecting it for my boss.’

‘And who exactly is your boss?’

‘It’s Sir Ralph Mercer. At the Home Office. It’s not the first time he’s left it here, either.’

Sixteen

Maxwell Knight held the walking stick in his hand, turning it reverently, as though it were a treasured historical relic, and Sally could hear the note of admiration in his voice as he asked, ‘How exactly did they work it?’ He had come to Scotland Yard in person to see face to face the man who had successfully evaded his organisation for a decade.

‘It was brilliant because it was so simple’, Sally said. ‘There was almost nothing that could go wrong. When Mercer had some scientific intelligence to pass to the Abwehr, he would conceal it in a walking stick. This particular stick came from Harrods and is quite a common design for racing or similar sports. The top unscrews and inside is a glass phial meant for brandy or whisky, like this.’ She demonstrated by unscrewing the chased silver knob and inserting a thin roll of paper inside.

‘Then he would walk from his office in the Admiralty building down the Strand to the Lyons cafe and buy a tea or coffee. He’d visit the lavatory and hang the stick on one of the clothes hooks on the wall near the door, then simply ‘forget’ to retrieve it and leave without it.’

Mac explained, ‘The office next to Lyons is a Thomas Cook’s travel agent’s office. We’re interviewing all the staff now. Someone who works as a clerk in that office was primed to watch for Ralph Mercer’s visits. I expect Mercer would pause outside their window and blow his nose or maybe look at travel posters in their window – something natural. The contact in the travel agent would phone De Witt and tell him there was a message waiting.’

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Knight finished it himself. ‘All De Witt had to do was collect Mercer’s walking stick and leave his own empty one in its place in its place, for Mercer to collect at his leisure.’

‘But what code did they use?’ Knight wanted to know. ‘How did they manage to get past the censors and my cryptography people?’

‘That was the cleverest part, Sir. They used a book code. But the text they used was the German scientific magazine *Deutsche Annalen der Physik*. All the latest scientific research was published there before the war, so it was easy to use existing papers to give references to British and American research, and use their research terms. The stories themselves sometimes read a little strangely but not if you knew the text referred to a certain page in a certain issue.’

‘I take it the emergency contact procedure was the normal contact in reverse?’ Knight asked.

‘Almost sir – that’s where they slipped up. When De Witt learned at our press conference they could be in trouble he left an emergency message in his stick in the cafe, making sure the confederate in Thomas Cook’s saw him and would phone Mercer with some excuse or other – “your suit is ready for collection from the cleaners” or some such message. Mercer couldn’t risk being seen visiting the Lyons too often, so he’d ask for one of the girls in the Admiralty typing pool, tell her he’d forgotten his walking stick and send her down to collect it. It happened several times but no-one thought anything about it, except as an office joke about his absent-mindedness.’

Knight’s face beamed with pleasure. ‘So it looks like we’re now in the home straight.’

There was a general sense of euphoria in Scotland Yard’s main conference room with a dozen or more people standing around chatting knowledgeably. As well as Menzies and Colonel Stanhope, both looking a lot more relaxed, there were policemen, senior civil servants and Special Branch officers. Mac said, ‘I don’t even know who half these people are – but everyone wants to be in at the kill.’

Knight murmured, ‘Success has many fathers.’

Sally folded her arms. ‘But no mother, apparently.’

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Commissioner Scott approached their small group, nodded to Maxwell Knight, ignored Sally completely and said, 'Well, Mackenzie, you've done a first rate job. I gather our man is in the main interview room now. It looks like it's your honours to have first crack at him.'

Mac said, 'I'd like Major Honeychurch of SIS to accompany me, sir.'

Scott looked part baffled and part insulted. 'Is that strictly necessary?' he demanded. 'Can't the Yard handle it? Why do we need a woman?'

'Major Honeychurch knows more about this case than anyone else, sir.'

'Oh, very well. You know your own business, I suppose.'

Sally reached behind Mac and, out of sight of the room, gave his behind a friendly pat, followed by a sharp pinch.

When Sally and Mac arrived at the interview room, two Special Branch officers were keeping observation on Mercer through a glass panel. 'You can take a look at him through here,' the duty officer said, indicating the panel in the wall of the interview room.

Sally looked at the miserable figure sitting alone at the table in the bare, harshly-lit room, his tie, belt and shoe laces removed for his own safety. Mac stood beside her.

'He doesn't look like much of a spy, does he?' She said. 'But then what does a spy look like, exactly?'

The man in the cell was no anonymous civil servant, or faceless bureaucrat. His face was well-known to her and everyone else in Britain. Sir Ralph Mercer was Britain's best known mathematician. The man who had single-handedly originated the science of Operations Research. Who had measured the effectiveness of the RAF's high-explosive bombing raids. And who had added a crucial extra 20 miles per hour to the Spitfire's top speed with his wing geometry.

As chief scientific adviser to the Home Office and to naval and military service chiefs, he had been at the secret centre of government throughout the war and into peacetime. It would be

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difficult, Sally thought, to find a less likely German spy – no doubt one of the main factors in his success in evading detection for a decade or more.

It wasn't until Sally had given the news to Maxwell Knight that his team at MI5 went back through their files and found that Mercer, like thousands of others, had had an 'innocent flirtation' with Mosley's British Union of Fascists while at Cambridge in the 1930s. As in the case of so many others, this flirtation with fascism had been written off as a youthful indiscretion and quietly forgotten about.

The man in the room before her looked completely broken even though no-one had yet interrogated him or laid a finger on him. He sat, slumped forward across the bare table top, his face buried in his arms – alone and friendless. It was a protective position she recognised only too well from her time in France.

'Has anyone spoken to him yet?' The Special branch man shook his head. 'Only to offer him a cup of tea, miss. No-one's had a go at him, if that's what you mean. I believe they've got the heavy mob standing by in case he won't co-operate.'

'Can I have five minutes alone with him, Mac?'

'The gentle touch, eh? Okay Blondie, go ahead. He looks ready to cough. Don't take too long about it, though.' He pointed to his wrist watch. 'The clock is still ticking.'

She pushed through the door and sat down at the oak table. On it was a cup of tea and a packet of cigarettes, both untouched.

Sally said in a sympathetic voice, 'Are you all right? You look done in.'

Mercer looked up, bleary-eyed, confused and said, 'I don't need a nurse, miss. Can you ask the officer in charge to come in please. I've got something I want to say.'

'My name is Sally Honeychurch. Major Honeychurch. I'm in charge of this operation, sir. If you have anything to say, you can say it to me. And quite frankly in your position I'd start talking right away because my colleagues have got some military interrogators lined up you don't want to meet.'

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The words stumbled out of his mouth as though he had been waiting to speak. ‘I’m willing to co-operate with you people, Major. I’m not what you think I am. When I hear the words “German Spy” I cringe at the thought that people could describe me in that way. I’m a spy by default, not by plan.

‘I’ve been blackmailed for years to do what they wanted. I was unable to escape for fear of being betrayed and imprisoned or hanged as a spy. I thought I was off the hook when the Nazis were defeated. I joined the crowds in Trafalgar Square on VE Day and shouted for genuine joy. But then the messages started arriving from East Germany. They told me I was now working for my new masters, the Russians – with the same threat hanging over my head. Quite honestly I’m glad it’s over because my nerves wouldn’t stand another month of it –’

‘Russians? Let me get this straight – you’re saying you’re now passing information to the Soviet Union? Not Germans? Or Nazis?’

He sat, a bewildered expression on his face.

‘One very important question I have for you. What was your work name?’

‘It was “Tristan”. I’ve always been a big Wagner lover, you see.’

‘Please think carefully, did you ever use the work name Felix?’

He shook his head. ‘No. Never.’

‘Are you absolutely certain – it’s very important. Could you have been known as Felix to your German contacts?’

‘No, it was always Tristan. Right from my days at Cambridge. I was recruited by a woman, you see, when I visited Bayreuth to hear the Ring Cycle. Her name was Isolde. Or she said it was. She was very beautiful – the most beautiful woman I’ve ever . . . Oh God, how bloody stupid I’ve been.’

Sally could feel the blood thumping at her temples but she screwed up every ounce of professionalism to keep her voice level. ‘One more question, sir. Did you meet in July 1939 in London with

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Edward, Duke of Buckingham and a German general named Kammler?’

The bewilderment on his face told Sally the answer even before he spoke. ‘I swear I’ve never met either of those gentlemen, then or any other time.’

A heavy lump settled on Sally’s chest and she felt light headed, as though she might faint. For one moment she tried to tell herself he was lying to muddy the waters, to discredit her, but every instinct told her he was speaking the truth. She wanted to smash her fist into his stupid, smooth, schoolboy face and get the truth out of him but she knew it was pointless and merely looked around helplessly at the glass panel where Mac and the duty officer stood waiting expectantly.

‘Inspector Mackenzie of Scotland Yard is going to ask you some questions now, about what information you’ve provided and who you gave it to. I strongly urge you to tell him everything you know because otherwise, they’ll send in people from your worst nightmares to get it out of you the hard way. Sorry, but that’s the way it is.’

She left Mercer in the interview room, stony-faced, her heart thumping, and pushed through the door. She found herself unable to face Mac and merely waved her arm inside to indicate to him to go in and start the debriefing process. He hesitated momentarily, puzzlement on his face, then went in.

In the conference room, Menzies and Stanhope were waiting together for her news, optimistic smiles on their faces. She breathed deeply. ‘I’m sorry, sir. We’ve got a German spy all right but he’s the wrong bloody spy. He’s not Felix – he’s being controlled by Moscow. He’s not going to be any help at all in finding the atom bomb terrorists. I’m really sorry.’

Menzies looked shattered. ‘Then we’re right back to square one.’

Stanhope’s face fell. ‘Frankly, sir I think we’ve devoted enough time and resources to this sideshow and we urgently need to focus back on our first priority – finding the terrorists and putting a stop to them.’

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Sally didn't wait to hear any more. She pushed her way through the double doors out of the conference room. As the doors swung behind her she heard Stanhope say to Major Whitlock, 'Now perhaps the bloody woman will drop all this damned nonsense about Nazis and let us get on with the real work.'

Seventeen

Sally gripped the wheel until her fingers ached and the tires of the Alvis screamed as she cornered too sharply. A brief glimpse of a shocked pedestrian's face brought her back. She took a deep breath, made a conscious effort to relax, and eased off the accelerator pedal. She was still only half aware of the shops and people flashing past the windows as she sped through the streets of South London without any plan or even sense of direction to guide her.

Her plan to trap Felix had failed and she was shattered. Every atom of her intuition had told her she was on the right track and she had felt certain the press conference would flush out the crooked reporter. It had never entered her mind for one second there could be more than one German spy or that she could be tracking down the wrong one.

Worst of all was the knowledge that she had wanted to use her exposure of Felix to hit back at Colonel Stanhope – throw it into his smug face and rub his nose in it, looking forward to curbing his arrogance. She cringed when she remembered how cocksure she must have sounded. She had talked them into spending precious time and manpower mounting an operation that produced nothing but a timid mathematician leaking fuel consumption figures and no leads to the atom bomb terrorists.

Sally stamped on the brakes and was thrown violently forward, almost hitting the windscreen. She had been driving furiously at a flashing Belisha–Beacon crossing, oblivious of the young mother with her baby in a pram until the moment she stepped off the pavement. The young woman desperately put out an arm as though trying to fend off the Alvis from her baby. Sally silently

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thanked whoever was watching over her that her brakes were good and the bonnet stopped in time, inches from the pram.

Sally wanted to stop and get out, say something, but the looming Carter Paterson lorry behind her tooted impatiently on behalf of the growing queue of vehicles behind. She mouthed ‘sorry’ to the young mother and resumed driving down what she now saw was the Old Kent Road.

She had stormed out of Scotland Yard without a word to Mac and was now angry, frustrated and sorry for herself in equal measure. She couldn’t bear the thought of the contemptuous look in his eye or the accusing note in his voice, even though her rational mind knew Mac would never reproach her that way. She had no destination in mind, but was simply following the road in front of her. She now found she was in fact driving out of London towards Kent. With the realisation came the unpleasant discovery that she was obeying an unconscious impulse to get out of London and as far away as possible.

The insight sobered her up and she began to pay attention to the speedometer on the dashboard and make sure the needle didn’t go too far above the 30 miles an hour mark. She wasn’t ready to turn round and go back just yet. But she resolved to prove to herself that she wasn’t running away from danger, by turning her unthinking flight into a conscious decision to choose a destination – giving herself an aim. She decided to carry on in the direction her unconscious urge seemed to be taking her, drive as far as Blackheath, into Greenwich Park to the Royal Observatory, a place she knew from childhood.

By the time she reached Deptford and drove up Blackheath Hill to the green expanse of the heath, she was in a calmer and more reflective state of mind. Her grip on the steering wheel was more relaxed and the painfully tight knot in her stomach began to ease. She drove through the ornate iron gates and down the Avenue to the Observatory and parked. The weak September sunshine was not enticing many visitors and there were few people about. She walked across to the statue of General Wolfe, commanding a panoramic view of the Maritime Museum far below, of the distant Thames

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curling away in either direction and – in the far distance – the dome of St Paul’s Cathedral and the City.

Dad had brought her here when she was a child. He had lectured at the Naval College and afterwards taken her sightseeing to the Prime Meridian at the Observatory to photograph her with one foot in the Western Hemisphere and one in the East. She could see him now, peering down into the Kodak at his waist, and waving her this way and that in the viewfinder and shouting instructions in his quarterdeck voice, which the other tourists also obeyed, thinking he was in charge. Then to wander with him through the white stone colonnades of the Maritime Museum, from gallery to gallery, looking at the paintings, the beautifully detailed model sailing vessels, the green corroded figuring on some bronze cannon from a long-ago naval battle, dredged from the seabed.

Somewhere in there, among the many rooms and galleries down below where she stood, was a model of the submarine, Holland One, made by her grandfather and presented to the museum, but they had never managed to find it. It remained a distant reminder of an unimportant childhood disappointment that still echoed somewhere in the present.

Autumn was beginning to show its colours in the trees around the park, and the first fallen leaves were starting to gather in auburn patches. A chill wind blew from the river and she pulled her raincoat closer around her shoulders. Only a year before she had stood on a promontory just like this one, watching a steel tower ten miles distant, as distant now as the dome of St Paul’s. All of London before her to the horizon could be vaporised in the blink of an eye by a venomous green mushroom cloud.

Rather than steadying her mind and restoring some perspective, the familiar sight of the cathedral had the opposite effect. Not a calming objective view, but an unnerving reminder of standing in the desert and watching hell let loose on earth. While behind her, the 24-hour clock showing Greenwich Mean Time was inexorably counting away the seconds.

By the time she started the Alvis again and pointed the long bonnet back to Central London, one thought was uppermost in her

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mind. She may have failed to find Felix, but her intelligence work was sound. The people she was looking for were Nazis. A Nazi spy had supplied Germany with British and American atomic secrets to supplement their own research. And that spy, whoever and wherever he was, had fed top secret information to SS general Franz Kammler.

Eighteen

‘Okay. Why are we meeting up here, exactly?’ Mac spoke with a touch of acrimony. He stood several feet back from where she sat on the Portland stone balustrade, refusing to come any closer and declining her invitation to sit next to her.

Sally shook her head in disbelief. For someone who had completed a dozen jumps from 1,000 feet or more, Mac cut a contradictory figure hanging nervously back and trying his best not to look over the edge into the city streets far below. ‘I needed to get some perspective. I thought this place might help.’

The truth was more complicated. Looking at St Paul’s Cathedral from Greenwich Park, ten miles distant had made the terrorist threat seem more real, yet still far away. Standing here, on the stone gallery surrounding the dome of the cathedral itself, made it both real and personal. Sally looked out over Ludgate Hill, Fleet Street, and in the distance, the grey ribbon of the Thames at Blackfriars and waved her arm. ‘The bastards are here somewhere, and we’re running out of time – I’ve wasted too much already.’

‘I know you, Blondie. When you bite your lip like that, it’s because you’re blaming yourself. I still don’t get why you’re so certain Mercer can’t possibly be Felix. Doesn’t he fit the bill?’

‘He’s not even a real spy – just someone who was compromised as a student and blackmailed ever since. He’s not mad enough to kill millions of people. A ten-ton atom bomb and team of terrorists can’t just turn up and disappear – they’re getting help from someone on the inside. But not a poor sod like Mercer.’

‘I still say it’s not your fault we caught the wrong spy.’

‘I was so bloody certain I’d got a line on Felix, I didn’t stop to question the evidence enough.’

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‘You haven’t done that badly, all things considered. You have at least laid hands on someone who was passing our secrets to the Russians – that’s something.’

‘I know that, Mac. The thing I’m really angry about is I’m damned sure the evidence was pointing in the right direction and my thinking was along the right lines. I just want to try to clear my mind a bit before trying to work out what the hell we do next.’

He grunted. ‘One thing is sure – it doesn’t matter how right we were, no-one’s going to give us another chance at the same trick twice, in case we get it wrong again. We can’t keep telling lies to the press. We’re going to have to think of something else.’

‘When I was driving back here from Greenwich, I went through that list of journalists in my mind. If Felix’s conduit to the Abwehr wasn’t one of the foreign journalists who stayed behind, then it was most likely one of the British reporters who was sympathetic to the Nazis – and probably still is.’

Mac barked a short laugh with little humour in it. ‘You’ll have a job there. There were plenty of those about in the 1930s.’

‘I know Lord Rothermere and his *Daily Mail* were right behind Hitler. And even some of the ones who weren’t fascists themselves thought disarmament was a good idea, and not just the tabloids either. Who was that *Times* man who got a lot of stick for appeasement?’

‘Geoffrey Dawson? He was a member of the Anglo-German Bond. There were plenty of others, both big fry and ordinary reporters.’

Mac ventured a little closer to the edge of the stone balustrade where Sally was sitting and peered down into Fleet Street. ‘I think it would be a waste of time to try to turn up an out-and-out traitor – there are just too many names on the list. I totted them up – I gave up when I got to four hundred.’

Sally nodded. ‘So if we can’t follow that line, what are we left with? We know Felix was keeping the SS informed about atomic developments. We know his reports were going to Franz Kammler, the one man in Nazi Germany with the ability, the manpower, the resources to build secret weapons. Could Kammler

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have created some kind of project or organisation that could still exist and be capable of a terrorist attack on this scale? More to the point, were the Nazis far enough advanced in their own atomic development to produce a bomb – even a crude improvised one?’

‘Okay, I’m with you there. It all comes down in the end to those two questions; could the Jerries have succeeded in making a bomb, even a crude one? And is there still some kind of Nazi organisation around capable of mounting a stunt this big?’

Far off on the Thames, a tug hooted and was answered by its partner. It sounded like they had berthed the vessel they were nursing into the dockside and were now heading back downriver for a new customer. The ship – whatever its origin – would soon be swarming with customs and Special Branch people, going over the cargo with Geiger counters before anything was landed. Closing the stable door, she thought.

‘Your first question is the important one’, she said. ‘Before we go any further we’d better find out if it was even possible for the Jerries to make an atom bomb – even a crude one. If not then we are barking up the wrong trouser leg.’

‘There’s another big question, too. Is Kammler really dead? The official record says he is, but how do we know for certain? Quite a few top Nazis made it to Argentina and Brazil. Maybe Kammler was one of them.’

Sally left her precarious perch on the stone balustrade. ‘I’ve got some contacts who I can talk to about the atomic development side and whether it’s realistic to think they could make a bomb of any kind. Mac, you get after Kammler and see what you can find out about him.’

To Mac’s visible relief they walked back to the door in the dome and began the long winding descent down the spiral staircase to ground level. He clung tightly to the rope hold strung along the wall. Sally spoke over her shoulder. ‘There’s one more puzzle. Unless they are planning to commit suicide, the bombers must make some arrangements to detonate the bomb by remote control. The test I saw in New Mexico was detonated by five miles of cables laid across the desert. They can’t use cables here – it would be too

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obvious – so they’ll have to use radio – can they be tracked? That’s a question for Q Branch.’

On the steps of St Pauls she added, ‘We’re not just looking for a place where they can hide a bomb away. We’re also looking for a place from where they can detonate the bomb by radio – and that’s going to have to be at least ten miles away. We’re not looking for one location – we’re looking for two.’

‘Who’s your scientist contact?’

‘I met two scientists in New Mexico I think will know the score. I’ll need your help finding one of them – Dr Richard Borden. Special Branch should know where he’s got to. The other’s a rather handsome Scotsman, like yourself. The last time I talked to him we were standing next to an atomic bomb that was about to go off.’

When she got to Broadway Buildings, she was held at reception and met by Menzies’ secretary, the meticulous lieutenant. He conducted her to Menzies’ office. She stood on the carpet in front of the Chief.

Menzies was wearing his Lieutenant General’s face. ‘I’m afraid there have been repercussions from what happened at Scotland Yard. Captain James has been writing memoranda about “irregularities” in the registry following your visits there. I did tell you I wouldn’t be able to cover for you with the Foreign Office if things went wrong – they want your head. I’m afraid they left me no alternative than to take away your security clearance.’

‘If I can’t even get into the building, how am I supposed to do my job?’

‘Very well. You can still attend briefings here but only if escorted. I’ll have to ask you for your pass.’

Sally reached into her bag and found the folded buff card. She reached to place it on his desk, then hesitated.

‘Am I still allowed to follow up the leads I’ve got, Sir? I know I messed up, but I’m still sure I’m on the right track. I just need a bit of back up.’ She put her pass on his desk.

‘I’m afraid they want you off the field investigation – they say you’re diverting resources with your Nazi obsession.’

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He got up from his seat, walked to the window and inspected the slate rooftops of St James's. Speaking with his back to her, he said, 'It's a free country, so I obviously can't stop you investigating.' He turned and looked at her. 'But stay away from Colonel Stanhope as far as possible. That's all.'

Nineteen

The uniformed security guard at the Queen's Road entrance to the National Physical Laboratory frowned and bent down to see who was at the wheel as Sally drove through the half-closed metal gates and stopped outside his lodge. When he saw it was an attractive young woman, his face changed to a smile and he rested his arm on the window ledge.

‘How can we help you, Miss?’

‘I've come for the job interviews.’

‘Have you got your interview letter?’

She rummaged in her bag. ‘I'm terribly sorry – I must have left it on the mantelpiece. I was in such a hurry.’

He shook his head. ‘I'm not supposed to let anyone in without a letter.’

‘Oh dear. And I'm late already. I really need this job. Couldn't you just . . .?’

‘Well, seeing as it's you – but you can't drive your vehicle inside the Lab, Miss, I'm afraid. You'll have to park here. It's just a short walk to Personnel,’ he pointed along the asphalt main drive to the cluster of laboratories and admin buildings a quarter of a mile away. ‘It's the red brick building you can see from here, that's the Darwin building. Report to reception. They'll show you to the Personnel Department.’

Sally parked by the railings that bordered the main road and followed his instructions, walking between the neat grassy verges, dotted with white painted stones, to the main building of the NPL.

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When she reached Personnel she took a quick glance back to make sure the guard had returned to his hut and carried on until she came to an anonymous single story building unobtrusively signed as ‘Nuclear Physics.’

Fergie looked just the same except he was more distinguished in a navy blue suit and tie than he had looked in desert shorts and shirt in New Mexico. He stood looking at her, his hands in his trousers pockets, with a wide grin of surprise.

‘What on earth are you doing here? I’m supposed to be interviewing for a new secretary for the physics section. You’re surely not looking for a job are you?’

‘Not really, Fergie. I’m sorry about being here under false pretences, but I need some expert scientific advice and this was the quickest way I could think of to get some.’

He looked at his watch and screwed his face up. ‘Okay, well, I’ve got several girls coming for interview – but fire away. If I can help I will. Take a pew. He held out his hand pointing to a utilitarian green metal table equipped with a small pile of leaflets about the National Physical Laboratory, for the day’s interviewees. They sat facing each other.

‘I’m working for SIS again – it’s a kind of freelance job. I’m afraid I can’t tell you what it’s all about and I’ll have to ask you to keep this strictly to yourself.’

‘Curiouser and curiouser. That’s okay by me – we are a secret establishment here, you know.’

‘I want to ask you about German atomic science. We’ve always been told they were nowhere near building a nuclear reactor let alone a bomb. You went there before the war, didn’t you? You met some of their scientists. Were they really years behind Los Alamos?’

Fergie compressed his lips and looked at the Ronson lighter he was playing with on the table top. He looked up at her for a long moment, measuring his words carefully.

‘I’ve no idea whether you know this or not, but we – I mean the whole Los Alamos team – were told the official story for public consumption was the Germans didn’t even come close to a bomb.

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The powers that be thought if the public had any idea how close they really came to being blown out of their beds there would be panic in the stock markets and most likely in the streets.

‘The reason we started developing the bomb was that Arthur Compton wrote a report for President Roosevelt that scared the life out of everyone. He calculated that if the Nazis built a uranium reactor – something we had already done – and ran it for two months, they could have enough plutonium for six atom bombs by the end of 1942. It was his report that shocked both Roosevelt and Churchill into action.’

‘Okay, but were the German scientists really up to producing something like that?’

‘Let’s put it this way – they were even keener than we were. As soon as the war started in 1939, they all got together of their own accord and formed what they called the ‘Uranium Club’. And that was even before they were taken over by the Wehrmacht – which they soon were. Later the SS took them over. In 1940, they started building a new lab for nuclear research next door to the Institute for Physics in Berlin. They called it the *Virus House* to put people off the scent.’

‘I know they were trying, but what I’m getting at is, did all this amount to anything concrete or was it all just theory?’

‘No – it wasn’t just theory. In June 1942, Heisenberg and one of his colleagues built a uranium-heavy water reactor in the laboratory in Leipzig University and got a sustained fission reaction. Strictly speaking they beat us by several months because it wasn’t until four months later Fermi’s pile went critical in the Harvard squash court.’

‘Blimey. So you’re telling me they were *ahead* of us?’

For the first time, Fergie cracked a smile. ‘Yes and no. They also demonstrated the world’s first nuclear disaster because after their pile had been running for 20 hours, the whole thing exploded, destroying the laboratory building. Heisenberg and his colleague only just got out of the building in time to save their skins.’

‘So it was an atomic bomb of sorts?’

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‘Not really, because they hadn’t made any attempt to tamp the fissionable material core as in a bomb, like the one you saw. The Trinity bomb was equivalent to about 20,000 tons of high explosive. Leipzig would only have been a few tons. But even something as crude as that would cause a lot of damage, spread a lot of radiation around and cause mass panic. A big bang and a nasty mess.’

‘What you’re saying is they were a lot closer than we’ve all been told.’

‘I’d say months rather than years, maybe closer – only you didn’t hear it from me. Of course they had no viable delivery mechanism. Their heaviest bomber couldn’t carry it. Realistically, the only way they could have delivered a nuclear bomb would have been to load it on a ship and sail it up the Thames and, of course, there was no chance of that succeeding . . .’

He stopped in mid-sentence and looked directly at her. His smile disappeared. ‘Oh My God. You’re not telling me . . .’

‘I’m not telling you anything, Fergie. I can’t tell you anything.’

He looked frantic. ‘My wife’s in Chelsea, with the kids. For God’s sake . . .’

‘Tell your wife to take the kids and stay with her parents, or her aunt, or her grandmother, or anyone. And not to come back for a week. That’s all I can say.’

He took her hand in his. He seemed close to tears. ‘Bless you for that.’

Sally got up to go. ‘I’m going to have to convince some very sceptical people about what you just told me, so I might be calling you again.’

Fergie looked grim. ‘Any time you like.’ He offered to walk with her back to the main gate.

As they neared the gate, she stopped. ‘Who specifically told you to play down German atomic developments? Where did the orders come from?’

‘That would have been from Downing Street, from the War Cabinet. It might have been Churchill himself for all I know. Although it was more likely to have been the Home Secretary – he

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was responsible for the Ministry Of Information and morale on the home front.

‘My guess would be the order came from him – Herbert Morrison.’

Twenty

Sally tried phoning Mac at his Desk at Scotland Yard but found him instead in the MI5 Registry at Leconfield House. ‘How did you end up there? I thought Kammler was an overseas target.’

‘He was. But he was put on a home watch list thanks to your Miss Richmond. Someone here has been pretty thorough. I’ve got everything except his inside leg measurement. But if this file is right, then he died at the end of April or beginning of May 1945, about the same time as Adolf blew his brains out. How are you doing?’

‘Listen, I need some information urgently. I’ve got some inside dope on German atomic bomb plans but to confirm it I need to go to the top – to Herbert Morrison, Deputy Prime Minister – and I haven’t got time to go through all the red tape of making appointments with tiny-minded civil servants. Is there anywhere in London where I might get five minutes alone with him – that’s all I need.’

‘He does stay in hotel rooms in London all week and, believe it or not, he walks to the office every morning. But you can’t just waltz up to a Cabinet minister and start interrogating him. You’ll get arrested or slung in jail.’

‘He’s supposed to be the people’s champion isn’t he? *The Evening Star* and the *Standard* call him “Mr London”. This is about saving London. And he knows the score already so I’m not giving away any secrets.’

Mac said, ‘He keeps rooms in the Howard Hotel, off The Strand, and every morning he walks down the Strand, through Trafalgar Square and down Whitehall. He’s got an office at Number

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11 Downing Street. I know that's the Chancellor of the Exchequer's address, but Morrison is the Deputy Prime Minister – he's very powerful and he's wangled himself offices there on the first floor. He does it every morning like clockwork. That's your best chance of catching him – as long as you don't get arrested.'

'Does he have a bodyguard or something?'

'Protection officer. Normally Morrison won't hear of it but protection was routinely stepped up for all ministers and government offices as soon as we found out about the murders at Hay's Wharf. The last I heard he still wouldn't change. Apparently he's a very stubborn little bugger.'

'Well he's going to have to talk to me, whether he likes it or not.'

Sally waited in the doorway of the Savoy Theatre reading the morning headlines in a copy of the *Daily Express*. The United Nations was holding its first meeting in London. There was to be a film festival held in Cannes. Mr Churchill gave a speech in Missouri saying 'an iron curtain had descended across Europe.' But there was no mention of Mercer's arrest and nothing more about IRA terrorists.

The two uniformed doormen of the Savoy Hotel only 50 yards away seemed to be casting frequent glances in her direction so she busied herself reading the playbills for tonight's performance plastered over the glass doors of the theatre.

Only two minutes after eight thirty, a familiar figure left the Howard Hotel and began stumping down the Strand towards Whitehall. His outline was unmistakable; short and stocky with a rumpled suit bought off-the-peg from the Co-op, and his trademark quiff of hair beloved by the political cartoonists.

She slipped quietly from the doors of the Savoy Theatre and walked casually down to the Strand, timing it so she naturally fell in step with him in as he strolled past. Ignoring the fast beating of her heart, she smiled and said casually, 'Good morning, minister. May I have a quick word?'

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Morrison stopped in his stride, paused and started to return the smile, then sensed the meeting was not by chance. 'Are you a reporter, young lady? If so I must tell you –'

'No sir. I'm not a journalist. I'm with SIS. I'm the officer who arrested Sir Ralph Mercer yesterday. Major Honeychurch.' This was the quickest form of introduction she could think of.

Morrison raised his eyebrows and resumed his walk. 'That was the last thing any of us expected especially at a time like this. I'm still not sure exactly what it means.'

'I'm fully briefed on the current situation, sir. Uncovering Mercer was part of that investigation. And it's that I want to talk to you about.'

Morrison looked her up and down – mainly up, as he was only five foot five tall. 'You're not the kind of intelligence bod I'm used to dealing with.'

'I've been told that before, sir. But I promise you my question is very important to the lead I'm following up.'

'Very well. You've got eight minutes – that's how long it takes me to reach Downing Street.'

They had already reached the turning to Whitehall and Sally estimated she had considerably less than eight minutes left. 'I want to ask about the war, sir, when you were Home secretary. I'm pursuing an independent line of enquiry concerning possible German involvement –'

'There's no chance of that, surely? The Nazis are a spent force.'

'That's what I want to ask about. I've spoken to atomic scientists at the National Physical Laboratory and at Woolwich. They both tell me the Germans were far more advanced than was ever admitted during the war. I'm trying to find out if the Nazis had what it takes to make a bomb – even a crude one.'

'I see what you're driving at, young lady. But I say again, the Nazis are over and done with. Their leaders have surrendered. They're either dead, locked up or they have handed in their weapons and gone home.'

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‘With respect, sir, that doesn’t answer my question. Can you tell me just how advanced the Germans were in the race to get the bomb?’

Morrison stopped walking again and looked hard into her face. She was being sized up to determine how trustworthy she was. She could easily imagine junior MPs being intimidated by this treatment.

‘War does strange things . . . You sometimes find yourself saying things you’d never say in peacetime, from the best of motives. It’s true the War Cabinet considered it best for morale to let it be thought the Nazis were nowhere near getting atomic weapons. If the men fighting overseas thought their homes and families were going to be burnt to a crisp, then discipline might break down entirely, even after the war was over. So, for the best of motives, it was judged best to let people think we were streets ahead of them scientifically. The truth is, it was a damned close thing.’

‘Would you say it was a question of months rather than years?’

‘That was the advice we received from the experts. You may know that my predecessor as Home secretary, Sir John Anderson, was a scientist who had specialised in uranium chemistry at university, so he was something of an expert. Unusual for a minister, I know, to actually know what he was talking about. It was his view also that they were months behind, not years. So, yes. It may be that your independent line of enquiry is a sensible one.’

He began, walking again, faster this time.

‘Thank you for confirming that, sir. It makes my job a lot easier.’

‘That’s as may be, but I must warn you it would not be good for public morale for you or anyone to publicly contradict the government’s stated position. People must be able to trust what their government says. Anyone who tries to undermine the government’s point of view could find themselves in serious trouble.’

‘Sir, everyone keeps telling me I’m going to end up in serious trouble – how much worse can that be than having half of London blown to pieces?’

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They reached the junction of Whitehall and Downing Street. Morrison stopped and faced her, his body language indicating this was as far as they were going together. 'Have you thought of entering Parliament, young lady? I think you should.'

'I'm afraid politics and my job don't mix, sir.'

'Well, come and see me if you change your mind. We need more tigresses in the house. It will ginger the men up and God knows some of them need it. Make sure I'm kept informed if you find out anything.'

Twenty One

‘You were bloody lucky you weren’t arrested,’ Mac told her. ‘If it had been me, I’d have felt your collar and had you inside a prison cell before your feet touched the ground.’ He was leaning against her kitchen doorway watching while she raided Ma’s secret supply of coffee beans again and ran two generous measures through the hand grinder. ‘You get away with an awful lot, Blondie. I’m not sure how many others would skate on thin ice the way you do and get away with it.’

‘You don’t know what you’re talking about, Mac. He was pleased to see me. He practically begged me to become an MP.’

When the coffee had percolated on the stove and she had poured two cups, they set up a makeshift office on the sofas in the sitting room, files and papers scattered on the glass table top while they drank. ‘Anyway, the point is he confirmed what we suspected. The war cabinet knew full well the Jerries were a lot further ahead with an atom bomb than they let on – they thought it would be bad for morale if it got out that London could suffer what happened to Hiroshima and Nagasaki. So they just pretended the German scientists fumbled it because they were half-hearted about Hitler and didn’t want to go down in history as mass murderers.’

Mac picked up his police notebook and tapped it with his index finger. ‘I’m afraid Special Branch came up empty on your nuclear scientist, Dr Borden. He’s disappeared completely. He doesn’t work at any government establishment anyway.’

‘Forget him. We don’t need him any more. My contact at NPL confirmed what Morrison says and he’s one of them – the atom scientists who worked on the bomb. He’s got no axe to grind and

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thinks the Nazis were only weeks behind rather than months or years. So it's technically possible all right – it's just that we haven't got any solid evidence to confirm they actually did it.'

Mac held up his notebook again. 'Well, we have now. I've found out a lot about Franz Kammler –'

Sally held up her hand. 'Hang on. There's something you should know. They've taken away my security clearance because of the cock-up at Scotland Yard. If you disclose anything classified to me, you could be in trouble, too.'

Mac grinned. 'Just like old times, then. As I was saying, I've found out a lot about Kammler. I think you're going to be surprised – or maybe not, going by what you've already told me.'

'Was he a scientist?'

'Not exactly. Kammler was a civil engineer who specialised in big construction projects. He joined the Nazis and became a member of the SS. That was probably a smart career move because the SS got control of all new big building projects. When the war started he was already a Lieutenant Colonel and by 1945 he was an SS General. One reason he got promoted so fast was he was a ruthless bastard. He didn't care how many dead bodies piled up as long as his construction projects were completed on time and on budget. He built the camp and the gas chambers at Auschwitz and the other camps, and he got such a reputation for efficiency he became a favourite with Himmler and Hitler.

'After that he was put in charge of building Hitler's biggest and most insane projects – the ones with millions of tons of steel and concrete. He built the underground factories for making the V2 rockets at Nordhausen and the underground works near Mauthausen for making the Messerschmitt Me 262 jet fighter – using slave labour, again. At one time he had four million slave labourers working under him and tens of thousands of them were worked to death – that's why he was so high on the Allied wanted list in 1945, along with Goering and Speer and Martin Bormann. There's hundreds of interview documents from the Nuremberg trials in the registry. The War Crimes Commission was trying everything to find out what happened to him.'

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‘What did happen to him?’

‘Hold on. I’ll come to that. Hitler was so pleased with Kammler he put him in charge of all secret weapons. Kammler was the man responsible for firing the V2s at London and he was given the task by Hitler himself of razing London to the ground in retribution for RAF raids.

‘We know the purpose of most of the projects Kammler was responsible for but there are some that were so secret we only have codenames. And this is where it gets really interesting. In 1944 Hitler appointed Kammler to take over the responsibility for Projekt Riese, or Giant, which involved the construction of a number of massive underground complexes in the Sowie Mountains of Lower Silesia, with some kind of special facilities. By this time, Kammler had almost complete dictatorial powers of cash and workers and he funnelled billions of Reichmarks into this project.

‘In April 1944 Hitler handed the project over to the SS and to Kammler personally. Whatever it was intended for it was on a huge scale with thousands of metres of tunnels and work areas. It took so many people that Kammler built a concentration camp next door to house them.

‘The original records were all destroyed in the war – either in the bombing or more likely by the SS. All anyone knows about it now is that the man put in charge scientifically was Professor Walther Gerlach, who was a nuclear physicist and the man responsible for Germany’s atomic weapons programme. And from the few documents we have left, we know that in 1942 the project was classified as “Kriegsentscheidend” – Decisive for the outcome of the war – which was the highest classification for secrecy and funding priority in Nazi Germany. If the Nazis really were building an atom bomb, this is where and when they were doing it.’

‘Okay, so he’s a real bastard and number one suspect but what happened to him in 1945?’

Mac riffled through some photocopies, fished out two pages and handed them to her. ‘That’s where you pay your money and take your choice. The War Crimes Commission got this statement from his driver,’ – he consulted his notebook – ‘bloke name of Kurt

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Preuk. He claimed that on 9th May – ten days after Adolf swallowed poison – he was ordered by Kammler to drive him out of Prague, going south into the forest area. He says Kammler ordered him to pull over in the forest where he shot himself. Preuk then says he buried Kammler’s body in a shallow grave in the trees. Of course, it’s anyone’s guess whether that’s true or not.’

‘So Kammler could just as easily have changed into an army uniform and merged in with all the thousands of others giving up to the Allies. Or skipped to Argentina or Brazil.’

‘That’s about the size of it.’

‘Has anyone looked for him? Are there any photos?’

Mac rummaged in his file folder again and produced a grainy passport-sized photo. ‘This is all we’ve got.’

Sally glanced at it and handed it straight back. ‘This could be anyone.’

‘He has one distinguishing feature. He suffered a wound to the head as a result of fencing. Lost part of an ear because he refused to wear a mask.’

‘That fits with what Vera Richmond told me. He competed at Olympic level in fencing. But none of this really tells us anything – we’re no further forward.’

‘Hang on. I’ve kept the best until last. Like you, I thought it was a bid odd MI5 and Special Branch should have files on a foreign general, even a bastard like Kammler. But there’s a reason. When he visited Britain in 1939 he met Edward Buckingham –’

‘We know all about that. Vera Richmond told us.’

‘There’s more you don’t know. As well as the meeting with ‘Felix’, Kammler had two other side trips which he thought were secret but which went down in the file because we were onto him thanks to Vera. The first was to The Duke of Buckingham’s country estate, Ivinghoe Abbey. We don’t know what happened there. But the second – wait for it – was to Fort Belvedere in Windsor Great Park, where he met and talked to the Duke of Windsor.’

‘What! But that doesn’t add up at all. The Duke of Windsor was no longer king – he’d abdicated and was living in Paris with missis whatsit in 1939.’

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‘But apparently he still officially had a home at Fort Belvedere until 1940. It would have been very simple for him to fly from Paris to Croydon and drive to the Fort. It wouldn’t take more than a couple of hours and no-one would ever have known, if it weren’t for the fact someone in Special Branch had decided to follow Kammler around.’

‘So what the hell were they meeting to talk about?’

‘We can work that out, too – thanks to the General Post Office. In 1936, the Baldwin government was so worried about King Edward’s close links to Hitler and the Nazis the Home secretary, Sir John Simon, ordered the GPO to intercept Edward’s telephone calls from the fort. No-one told them to stop, so some clerk in a basement at St Martin’s le Grand carried on listening and making notes even after Edward had abdicated and gone to France.

‘We’ve still got the GPO intercept transcripts on file. There’s two of them. Take a look at this.’ He passed across a carbon copy of a typed document. It was headed ‘Fort Belvedere: Incoming telephone conversation recorded at 19:43 hrs on 25 July 1939. Superintendent R. Kelly.’

Recipient (Duke of Windsor): Hello

Originating Caller: This is Teddy, your Royal Highness.

Recipient: Yes, Teddy, what news have you got for us?

Originating Caller: Sir, our good friend is here and anxious to meet in person.

Recipient: Come to the Fort right away. I’ll be here.

Originating Caller: We’ll start now, sir.

Telephone call ends 19:46 hrs.

Sally frowned. ‘That doesn’t give much away, does it?’

‘No, but the second call later on does, the one the Duke of Windsor made *after* the meeting.’ Mac handed over a second sheet. This time it was the top file copy, not merely a carbon. It had been initialled by half a dozen people who had evidently seen its contents. It was headed ‘Fort Belvedere: Outgoing telephone conversation

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recorded at 22:17 hrs on 25 July 1939. Superintendents, R. Kelly, M Forster, J. Jaynes, J Hilman.’

Recipient: Buckingham here, sir.

Originating Caller (Duke of Windsor): Teddy, I want to thank you from the bottom of my heart. You’re a true friend and I don’t have many of those any more. I just wanted to re-iterate that my pledge to you stands whatever happens.

Recipient: Thank you, sir.

Originating Caller: It may take longer than we think but I have no doubt that both you and I will regain our proper positions once certain people have come to their senses and the two sides have concluded a peace agreement.

Recipient: Of that I have absolutely no doubt, my liege.

Originating Caller: Bless you, Teddy.

Telephone call ends 22:22 hrs.

Sally leaped to her feet. She re-read the document and let her hand fall to her side. She looked at Mac in astonishment. ‘This is bloody dynamite. These people were planning a coup d’etat. They were going to take over the country.’

Mac nodded grimly. ‘I could hardly believe it at first, but there’s even more in the file. Once the Duke had been appointed Governor of the Bahamas and he and the Duchess of Windsor were safely out of the way in Nassau, Churchill asked the FBI to spy on them in case they were intriguing behind his back. The FBI even bugged the residence. They recorded the Duke as saying, “After the war is over and Hitler has crushed the Americans . . . we’ll take over. They don’t want me as their King, but I’ll be back as their leader”.

Sally paced up and down. ‘It’s there in black and white. Hitler is sending word, via Kammler, offering the Duke of Windsor the throne as a puppet king once Britain sues for peace. And the

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Duke if offering Teddy Buckingham a job as his right hand man – most likely prime minister or some such title. Maybe even ‘Leader’.

‘Except the plan didn’t come off. If Halifax had become Prime Minister he would have signed a peace agreement and so would Chamberlain if he’d stayed on. But Churchill became PM, dug his heels in and wouldn’t play ball, so the plan was never executed –’

‘But if Kammler managed to build a bomb in his underground Silesian factory using information from Felix, even a crude bomb, then the plan is still on.’

‘Except they’d have to wipe out the government, Westminster, Whitehall, the Ministry of Defence, the whole lot before they and their right wing friends could move in.’

Sally screwed up her face in disbelief. ‘This plan is complete madness. It would never come off in a million years. No-one in the armed services is going to take instructions from a King who abdicated or a bunch of SS thugs. The whole thing is lunacy.’

‘You know that and I know that. But the problem is, *they* don’t know that.’

Sally was silent for a moment. ‘If what is happening now is what we think it is – an effort to resurrect this pre-war coup and make it work this time, it means Kammler – or someone exactly like Kammler – must still be alive and kicking and is the brain behind the atomic device.’

Mac nodded in agreement. ‘And it also means something else. Edward Duke of Buckingham was up to his neck in it then and is still up to his neck in it now. He’s the only live lead we’ve got. One way or another, Teddy Buckingham is our number one target.’

Twenty Two

Sally stood at Stanhope's office door, accompanied by the Chief's secretary, and knocked.

‘You sent for me, Colonel?’

Stanhope leaped to his feet, grabbed his red beret from the In-tray and barked, ‘There you are. Get your coat, Major. You and I have been summoned to the presence.’

It was the first time Stanhope had used her former rank, or bothered to address her with any respect at all, and Sally's reaction was astonishment – quickly turning to suspicion.

‘What presence is that, then sir?’

‘Never mind the questions, now. Just get your things and follow me – we've got a long drive ahead of us.’

Parked outside Broadway was a Humber staff car in army colours with a young squaddie behind the wheel. Stanhope walked smartly round to the driver's side, opened the door. ‘Make yourself scarce, laddie. I'll do the driving.’ He motioned for Sally to get into the passenger seat.

‘Would you like me to drive, sir? I am experienced.’

Stanhope's reply was to ram the gear lever into first and press down hard on the accelerator as the big Humber lurched forward and she slammed her door shut. ‘I've never been driven anywhere yet by a woman, and I don't plan to start now.’

‘Can I ask where we're going, sir?’

‘First, we're not going anywhere, and we're not seeing anybody? Got it? This is top secret. So keep your trap shut about anything you see or hear. It seems the Chief has been called to Chequers to brief the P.M. and his Deputy on the situation. Apparently someone in Downing Street has heard about your little

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escapade at Scotland Yard and wants a first-hand report. Most likely a right royal bollocking, I should think. I've got to deliver you and get you there in one piece.'

Sally had no idea how to respond to this but felt something was called for. 'That's very good of you, sir.'

Stanhope shot a sideways glance at her to see if she was being deliberately insubordinate, decided the innocent look on her face was genuine, and put his foot down even harder.

They headed north up the A1, into the Buckinghamshire countryside and turned off along the foothills of the Chilterns. Stanhope said very little as they drove, and continued to keep his foot hard on the accelerator as they clipped the hedgerows in country roads and the Humber's engine whined as he crashed up and down the gears. When they were only a couple of miles from the Prime Minister's country residence, he said, 'Have you met Attlee?'

'No, sir. I don't move in those circles. What's he like?'

'I met him a few times in the war and again because of this current business. He's very quiet and doesn't say much, but don't let that fool you. He's a one-man brains trust. They say he does the *Times* crossword every morning but doesn't bother to write the answers in – he just remembers them and does it in his head. But he's very shy, so don't be put off. Just answer his questions as briefly as possible and you'll be all right. And we can get home for some sleep – God knows I need it.'

Thanks to Stanhope's reckless speed, they covered the forty miles from London in less than an hour, arriving at Princes Risborough at six thirty and Chequers itself by seven. The Prime Minister's country residence, the 16th century manor house at the foot of the Chiltern Hills, had evidently been pressed into service as a temporary safe place for Cabinet ministers, as a dozen cars were drawn up on the gravel drive. Several service drivers, army and RAF, lounging on their vehicles and chatting, disposed of cigarettes and came to attention as Stanhope pulled up beside them, below the high red-brick gables.

A sergeant from the Women's Royal Army Corps opened the massive studded door as they crunched across the gravel drive, and

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asked them to wait in the timbered hall and leave their coats on the circular marble table. She disappeared for only a couple of minutes before returning and asking them to enter the sitting room.

Stanhope spoke in her ear in a low voice. 'Better just keep your mouth shut and let me do all the talking.'

The informality of the large sitting room into which they were shown took Sally by surprise. The Chief was standing towards the rear of the room, holding a glass of whiskey. Parked in front of the fireplace, in his shirtsleeves, warming his backside at an early log fire was the stocky figure of Attlee's deputy, Herbert Morrison. It took Sally a moment to realise the Prime Minister was sitting in the corner of one of the sofas that flanked the fireplace, reading a document, he looked so inconspicuous in a grey pullover, much the same shade as the sofa on which he sat.

Stanhope came to attention and saluted smartly. 'Colonel Stanhope reporting, sir.'

Morrison came forward, smiled broadly and extended a welcoming hand to Sally. 'Major Honeychurch – have you caught any more Nazi spies?'

'I'm doing my best, sir. Unfortunately I haven't got the right one yet.'

Morrison turned to the PM. 'Clem, this is the young woman who had the balls to brace me in Whitehall.'

Attlee looked up, placed his paper on the coffee table and patted the sofa seat beside him. 'Sit here, Major. Herbert says you think we're looking for Nazis. Why?'

'I've put together several pieces of evidence that point to a German connection, sir; ammunition, signals intelligence and MI5 reports. I know it sounds hard to believe –'

'No. Not at all. Half expecting it. I was in the first lot. Buggers never give up even when they're beaten. Tell her about the Committee, Herbert.'

Morrison relinquished his position in the front of the fireplace and sat on the other sofa facing her. 'Ever since the first bomb was exploded at Alamogordo the Cabinet has thought about little else but some kind of sneak atomic attack. One of the first

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things we did on being elected was to form a Whitehall commission – we called it the Imports Research Committee so as not to arouse too much interest. Had people from every department – defence, scientific intelligence, security service. We asked them to answer one question: given we import 70 per cent of our food, and an equally high proportion of raw materials, from overseas how could we prevent a hostile power or terrorists from smuggling an atomic bomb into a British port in the hold of a ship, among this mass of imports?

‘The answer is frightening. There aren’t any practicable steps we can take in peace time to prepare against this threat. So we got to thinking who we had to guard against. There was the Russians, obviously –’

Attlee interrupted him. ‘That’s when I said Germans. Neo-Nazis. That’s why I’m taking you seriously. What have you got?’

‘The most solid links we’ve got are to an SS General, Franz Kammler. And a prominent British person.’

‘No need to be shy. You mean that Nazi bastard Buckingham.’

‘Yes, sir, him.’

‘What about this SS General?’

‘It looks like he died in 1945. Buckingham is now our only lead.’

Attlee looked up and looked around at the waiting faces; Morrison, Menzies, Stanhope, as though seeking some consensus but finding none.

‘Some people here agree with you and some don’t. Eight million people in London, including my family. Do whatever you have to, Major. Carry on.’

‘That’s not going to be easy, Sir. I’ve been stripped of my security clearance on the orders of the Foreign Office.’

Attlee barked a short laugh. ‘Not the first time the FO and I have disagreed. You have my personal authority. Do whatever you have to.’

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Menzies stepped forward, leaned over the back of the sofa and whispered in Attlee's ear. Attlee added, 'You, too, Colonel. Good job. Let's polish this business off.'

As they drove back to London it was getting dark in the narrow country lanes but Stanhope drove just as fast and just recklessly as on the journey up, despite the fading light and the dangerous bends.

'You got off lightly, there, Major.'

'It wasn't much of a bollocking, sir, was it?'

'If you'd been a man, you wouldn't have got away with it. A pair of blue eyes go a long way with politicians.'

Stanhope put his foot down even harder and Sally involuntarily put out a hand to steady herself on the dashboard. He grinned maliciously, 'I don't suppose you're used to driving like this, eh?'

'Well yes, sir. I did quite a bit of driving myself before the war.'

'Driving Mum to the shops was it?'

'No sir. Actually it was driving from Mombasa to Cairo.'

Stanhope shot a look of incredulity at her. 'That's a hell of a long way, isn't it?'

'Two thousand miles, sir. Some of the worst roads in Africa. It was fun, though. These roads are a bit on the narrow side, sir, aren't they? We'd better be careful, hadn't we?'

Stanhope was about to reply when the car bucked as the front nearside wheel smashed against a whitewashed kerbside stone, placed there to warn motorists of the approaching bend. They heard the repeating thrash of a burst tyre on the tarmac road surface and Stanhope pulled up. They got out and found the tyre was not only flat but had started to shred.

Stanhope moved to the boot. 'You'd better stand clear over there while I deal with this.' He got the car jack, the wheelbrace and the spare wheel, put the spare and the brace on the ground, knelt down and began to jack up the car.

Sally was unable to keep quiet at this act of stupidity. 'Excuse me sir. Don't you want to undo the wheel nuts while the

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wheel is still in contact with the road? Then the wheel won't move when you undo them. You won't have to hold it steady.'

Stanhope looked up at her and anger flashed briefly in his eyes. He grunted, 'I suppose that would be best, yes. It's just that I'm in a hurry.'

'We had a motor maintenance course in the ATS, sir. Would you like me to do it? You'll get your nice clean uniform all dirty.'

Sally could see her mild sarcasm has gone completely over his head, but he at least had the grace to yield his place, stand up and say, 'Be my guest. You're obviously the expert.'

Sally knelt and quickly removed the hubcap. She used the wheelbrace to remove the wheel nuts and placed them carefully in the hub cap. To smooth his ruffled feathers she made conversation as she worked, saying pleasantly, 'My Dad taught me always to put the nuts in the hub cap. It's so they don't get lost, while you change the wheel you see, sir.'

'Some kind of garage mechanic is he, your Dad?'

'No sir, he's an officer in the United States Navy – Captain of the aircraft carrier, *USS Saratoga*. But he really knows his stuff with cars, too.'

When she'd completed the wheel change, Stanhope said, 'I suppose you'd better drive too. My eyes are not used to these country lanes at night.'

Sally sat in the driver's seat, reached under the dashboard and located the full beam switch for the headlights. At once the road ahead was no longer the half-invisible tunnel of darkness it had been when Stanhope drove on sidelights but was flooded with light by a pair of powerful headlamps.

'That's better, sir.' She said cheerfully. 'We can see where we're going now.'

The Colonel remained unspeaking, looking out of the window, for the rest of the journey back to Broadway. When Sally drew up outside, he said in a quieter voice, 'Look, you have to appreciate that I and my paras have just spent several years of our lives killing Nazis. If I've been a bit hard in speaking to you . . . well

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I'm just a rough professional soldier who does a dirty job and lost a lot of men parachuting into Normandy on D-Day.'

'I know, sir. I was there.'

'What do you mean you were there? Where?'

'I and my resistance network were waiting in the marshes behind Sword Beach. We attacked the Jerries in the rear. We'd been preparing for weeks.'

'But . . . but how did you get there?'

'The same way you did, sir. I parachuted behind Jerry lines – several times, actually. I did tell you I was with SOE.'

'But I thought you people landed by plane or something. You were spies weren't you?'

'No, sir. That was SIS, they were the spies. We were trained in weapons and explosives. Our job was subversion and sabotage. We were trained to kill Jerries. I'm afraid we killed rather a lot of them.'

The look on his face was one of undisguised admiration and he broke into a smile. 'I seem to have underestimated you, all round, Honeychurch.'

'If you say so, sir.'

'I won't make the same mistake again.'

Twenty Three

‘You haven’t a hope in hell,’ Maxwell Knight said. ‘The man’s untouchable. He’s a law unto himself. You’ve as much chance of arresting His Majesty the King.’ He said this over his shoulder while concentrating on feeding insects to a fat green lizard hanging on a branch in a glass case.

Sally shook her head. ‘I’ve been told that before. But what if it’s just unthinkable rather than actually impossible?’

Knight resumed his seat behind his desk and lay down his feeding tweezers on the worn red leather top. ‘First, he’s a royal duke. Second he’s a cousin of His Majesty the King. Third, he’s a senior Member of the House of Lords, Fourth, he’s hereditary Constable of the Tower of London – he’s responsible for guarding the Crown Jewels, for God’s sake. He’s a close personal friend of the Duke of Windsor and of many of the most noble names in Britain. If you arrested him, you’d have to arrest half of Debrett’s Peerage. Believe you me, we went into this very closely when war was declared in 1939 and Mosley and the others were interned.’

‘But it was you who told me MI5 knew about Buckingham’s meeting with Kammler and “Felix”. What’s that if it isn’t evidence?’

‘At the time of that meeting, we were not at war with Germany. It’s not a crime to believe in fascism, or to admire foreign dictators – only to take actions that disturb the King’s peace or threaten the defence of the realm in time of war. There wasn’t any evidence Edward Buckingham had done either – not evidence that would stand up in in a court of law, anyway. The Attorney General told us then it wasn’t on and I’ve not the slightest doubt he’ll tell you the same thing today.’

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Sally had come to Dolphin Square prepared to argue her corner but she could find no reply to this broadside and sat in frustrated silence.

Knight adopted an innocent tone of voice, 'What does your Chief have to say about it?'

She pressed her lips together and stared at him, 'He said pretty much the same thing. He couldn't risk the reputation of the service on what might be a hare-brained scheme. I'm afraid my name doesn't carry much weight at the moment. I haven't even got security clearance any more.'

Knight said, 'Hmmm. That's awkward. You probably won't know this but it is widely believed that your Chief, Stewart Menzies, is in fact the son of King Edward VII – but on the wrong side of the blanket. I may add it's a story he himself never denies, so I'm not just telling tales. It accounts for his close friendship with the King and the royal family. It also means – and I'm sorry I have to say this – your Chief is related to Edward, Duke of Buckingham. I'm not suggesting for one moment he could be involved in anything he shouldn't – I've no doubt he's a patriot. But you can see why it would make it awkward for him to act unless he has conclusive evidence, and that's the one thing I'm afraid you haven't got – unless I'm much mistaken?'

Sally's chin sank into her hand and she nodded her agreement. 'You're not mistaken, sir. Concrete evidence is the one thing we don't have.'

Knights' manner became less official, almost intimate. He toyed with the tweezers. 'Of course, there is the alternative route you could try.'

'What alternative?'

'You could try getting inside his organisation.'

'And how exactly would I do that?'

'I can arrange for you to be invited to a society affair in London tonight where he will be. The rest would be up to you.'

Sally was stunned into silence. When she found her voice again it was to protest, 'But I'm no femme fatale. I'm not even a spy, strictly speaking.'

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‘Neither was Vera Richmond. But she managed it.’

‘She had time to prepare the ground. I’ve never even met the man.’

Knight got up, went to the window and looked out on the square. She followed his gaze and saw a fat male pigeon with an iridescent green neck, puffing itself up and eyeing up its chances with a coy female bird. ‘One thing I can tell you. Buckingham fancies himself with the ladies. And he’s particularly susceptible to tall blondes. He refers to ladies like that as his “Maidens”.’

A nauseous wave swept briefly over her at this idea and Sally lost her customary self-control. ‘Couldn’t we just bring him in, take him somewhere private and beat the – the truth out of him?’

Knight turned to her. ‘I’m sorry to be so blunt, but after your last little *faux pas* at Scotland Yard, who are you going to get to authorise that? Don’t forget, he may be an obnoxious bastard, but he might also be completely innocent of involvement in this terrorist affair. We’ve only got your hunch for it.’

He returned to his seat at the desk and clasped his hands in front of him. He spoke in a gentler, almost fatherly way.

‘To be fair to him, I must tell you I’m not entirely convinced of your view that he could be mixed up in this terrorist bomb attack. He is a twisted sod and capable of many things, probably including murder. But I’m not sure he’s insane enough to want to destroy London. What would he gain? But then again I’m probably prejudiced. It’s always rankled with me that he slipped through our fingers and got away scot free when Britain was up against it in 1939. So I’m just not convinced either way. Nothing he does would surprise me.’

The tightening knot in her stomach told Sally he spoke the truth and her options were rapidly dwindling – had already dwindled – to a single stark choice. If anyone was going to take on Buckingham it was going to have to be her. And it would have to be face to face.

Knight carried on speaking, as though briefing her for an operation already officially sanctioned at the highest level, instead of two angry misfits trying to raise each other’s spirits. ‘There are a

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couple of things in your favour, and that might help you pin him down. The first is Vera. She probably knows him better than his own mother. And I know she'd be willing to help you in any way she can.'

'And the second?'

'We know from surveillance before the war, and from Vera's own reports, that Buckingham is obsessed by the occult or the paranormal – call it what you will. The Anglo-German Bond shared its headquarters in Bloomsbury with the Society for Psychic Phenomena – they're really one and the same – and many if not most of the members of one are also members of the other. There seems to be something about the psychic world that fascinates the right-wing mind. Himmler and Hitler were psychic nuts, too.'

'What were – or are – they like, the members?'

'The usual mixture. Minor aristocrats who think they are being dispossessed by the unwashed hordes of democracy, failed politicians, a few retired admirals and generals who think they are the reincarnation of Julius Caesar or Hannibal, and old ladies who speak to red Indian spirit guides from the other world. I believe they even have writers of penny dreadful thrillers who are Satanists in their spare time.'

'They don't seem to represent much of a danger to world peace.'

'Individually, they don't, but collectively, I'm not so sure. The problem is – whether they realised it or not – they encouraged Hitler to think he could conclude a peace agreement with Britain if only the right people were in charge. Did you know his favourite magazine was the *Tatler*? He used to like to flick through the pages looking at the photos of the English aristocracy at play. He was once overheard to say – "those are valuable specimens – those are the ones I am going to make peace with." The trouble is there are still people in Germany today who believe the same thing – and there are still people here who agree with them. That's why I'm willing to help you. That's if you'll let me, of course.'

Sally bit her lip. 'There's a situation report meeting at Broadway buildings in half an hour. We'll get the latest field reports

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and find out what the Cabinet has decided then. Frankly I doubt anything has changed since yesterday. If that's so, then I can't see any alternative to going undercover like you suggest. . . but to be honest, I've been out of it so long, I'm not sure I'm the right person for a job like this. These people are dangerous – they've killed more than a dozen people without thinking twice about it. From what I hear Buckingham is a mad dog. There's next to no time left. I . . . I just don't know.'

'Don't sell yourself short, Major. I've looked up your record. You did an outstanding job in France, up against the Gestapo and the SS.'

Sally helped herself to a cigarette from Knight's silver case on the desk, and lit it. 'They say these things are coffin nails. Not much point in giving up now. I'll take a crack at it – but only if we can organise proper preparation and planning. Can we meet here in, say, two hours with me, Mac and Vera to go over it all?

Knight tickled his parrot's poll. 'I'll set the wheels in motion.'

Twenty Four

Sally found Mac waiting for her when she arrived at Broadway. ‘The meeting for today’s situation report has been switched to the fifth floor conference room’, he told her. ‘A lot of new faces arrived in the past quarter of an hour. From the look of them, they’re civil servants – I think the balloon must be going up.’

When they entered the conference room the unfamiliar faces Mac had tipped her off about were already seated: very senior-looking, very grim-looking. There were half a dozen men in dark suits, as well as Menzies and Sinclair, and Stanhope with his two faithful majors, trotting behind. There weren’t enough chairs around the conference table for everyone to sit: Sally, Mac and some others remained standing.

Menzies said, ‘I’ve just come from Downing Street. The full cabinet, the chiefs of the imperial general staff and senior civil servants have handed down a plan of action on which I’m now going to brief you.

‘The government has still not received any form of communication from the terrorists, either an ultimatum, or any specific demands. We still do not know their identity or their aims, but we must assume they are going to try to destroy organised government in the capital in order to disrupt the life and running of the country. In the absence of any further developments, the Cabinet and General Staff have drawn up three emergency plans, which supersede all previous orders and will be put into action immediately.

‘Emergency Plan A is for the Cabinet, service chiefs, senior civil servants and key staff to evacuate to a prepared location. It’s somewhere midway between Oxford and Cambridge so they can continue to receive academic advice. This will be implemented

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today at 17:00 hours. The Royal Family has already left for Sandringham. We can only hope and trust that will put them out of harm's way.

'Plan B is for all senior emergency services personnel, fire brigade, police, hospital staff and Civil Defence people to be relocated ten miles outside London. In the event of a disaster these people will be urgently needed for rescue and to restore order. This plan will be implemented at 17:00 hours tomorrow, leaving a skeleton staff on duty inside London.

'Emergency plan C is for the bulk of military personnel, including those present in this room, also to be withdrawn from the London area at 17:00 hours tomorrow, assuming they have not found the terrorists. The Cabinet and joint chiefs will rule at that time on any further plans.

'The press are starting to ask difficult questions so we have issued a Defence notice to editors and told them anything published could be contrary to the Defence of the Realm Act, so we have a short breathing space there.

'But there can be no let up. We have the rest of today and – if we're lucky – perhaps up to one more day to find these people and then we will have to assume the worst. I don't like it, but there it is. Peter what have you got for us?'

Stanhope's two aides manhandled a large map board onto the easel. It was obvious at once that, unlike the previous meeting, most of London was now cross-hatched in red.

Stanhope said, 'We've now cleared approximately 95 per cent plus of the target area. As you can see, almost all the residential areas of North London are clear, together with the suburbs in the south where, again, it's almost clear apart from three industrial estates in the Croydon area. That leaves some of the industrial parts of west London, from Fulham to Chiswick and some south east sections, along the Thames from Shadwell to Woolwich.

'The good news is the central area, including the City of London itself, are in the clear already. There's only offices and public buildings there, which are being progressively closed up temporarily on various pretexts and in any case less than 5,000

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people actually live in the City. By tomorrow, Whitehall and Westminster will also be clear and evacuated, so we are in fact getting on top of it.'

One of the civilians present, who Sally did not recognise, asked, 'Are we any nearer to identifying the terrorists or laying hands on them?'

Menzies said, 'We've had far less success, there, I'm afraid. We have identified a major Russian agent in Whitehall itself, thanks to some very smart detective work by a member of my SIS team. But as of this morning we're no nearer making any arrests or locating the bomb itself.'

'There is one further fact to report. The boffins have done their sums again and although they disagree among themselves, about half of them think it's theoretically possible to assemble a workable device from pre-fabricated components in three to four days if they work round the clock – one day less than their previous estimate. That means the bomb could go off any time now. We no longer have any room for manoeuvre. The atom scientists have also made an evaluation – guesses really – of what kind of bomb it might be and what damage it could cause. At the top end it could be a crude version of the Hiroshima uranium bomb. That one exploded with a force of 15,000 tons of TNT and killed 80,000 people. Everything within a one mile radius was flattened. At the low end, the bomb could be very inefficient in its use of uranium but would still be equivalent to tens or hundreds of tons of TNT. That would destroy a large area, kill many thousands and would also shower the city with radioactivity.'

Mac and Sally sat in silence in her Alvis outside Broadway. 'Any ideas, Blondie? Because I'm bugged if I have.'

'We've only got one lead left now. Maxwell Knight at MI5 thinks he can get me into a charity dinner tonight where Buckingham will be guest of honour. If I can somehow get inside –'

Mac exploded. 'You're out of your mind. If he is what we think he is, he'll eat you for breakfast.'

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‘You’ve just said yourself we’ve got nothing else left. I’ve got no alternative.’

Mac slammed his hand on the steering wheel. ‘No alternative? For God’s sake listen to what you’re saying. These people are cold-blooded murderers. One whiff of who you really are and you’ll be floating down the Thames with a pickaxe in your skull.’

‘Thanks for the vote of confidence. I have been undercover just once or twice before, you know Mac.’

‘That was with training, back-up, weapons, planning. And what the hell are you going to do if Buckingham decides he’d like to play doctors and nurses.’

She pointed her index finger at him and pulled an imaginary trigger. ‘I’ll do what London tells me to do.’

‘And what if London has ceased to exist? You heard the Chief: the government’s doing a bunk.’

‘Then we’ll do what we did in France. We’ll handle things our own way.’

Twenty Five

When they arrived at Dolphin Square, Knight's face was grim as he let them in. At first Sally thought the invitation had fallen through. Once they were seated, Knight said, 'Before we start I have to tell you Vera won't be joining us. She gone AWOL and it's all my fault, I'm afraid.'

'What's happened to her?'

'I paid her a visit in Soho yesterday, after you'd seen her. Because of all she'd done, I felt I owed it to her to tell her what was going on – she'd only stayed in London because I'd asked her to. Guilty conscience, I suppose. Anyway, I told her to get ready to leave, but I also asked her to attend a briefing meeting here before she went – I had a feeling this is what it would come down to in the end. She must have just panicked and left. I noticed she'd been drinking rather heavily. Drink can make you do some strange things.'

Sally bit her lip so hard she tasted blood. Vera had been the ace up her sleeve. Now instead of detailed inside information about Buckingham and his household, all she had was just guesswork. This job had always seemed a long shot: now it seemed an effing impossibility.

'Okay. We are where we are, and we've all been here before. Let's get on with it. What can you tell me about Buckingham?'

'He's not an easy person to categorise – certainly not the same as the typical fascist, like Mosley. But he was fanatically pro-German and, once Hitler came to power, fanatically pro-Nazi. To be fair you must appreciate that many people in the early 1930s thought Hitler was the saviour of Germany. Some people thought he was the saviour of Europe from the Russians. Even Churchill wrote

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admiringly of his achievements in rebuilding Germany. I suppose the truth at that time was somewhere in between. We couldn't tell if the Nazis were a good thing with bad side effects, or a bad thing with good side effects. Our ambassador in Berlin, Neville Henderson, thought we should reach an accommodation with him. It was only once the war started we realised Hitler was a mad dog set on conquering the world and murdering millions of innocent people. Winston had seen it from the start, of course.

'But you have to remember things looked different back then. Oswald Mosley had been a respected politician before he became leader of the fascists – he was a minister in Ramsay MacDonald's Labour government. When he founded the British Union of Fascists it became the fastest growing political party in Britain. The cabinet got the wind up when they realised his party had grown from nothing to 50,000 members in only a couple of years.

'The Office is always in an awkward position over politics. You can't spy on people or arrest them just because they happen to believe things that most people find repugnant. As I said, we were convinced Buckingham was in it up to his neck, plotting to bring the Duke of Windsor back from exile in France and put him on the throne again – a Nazi puppet. But he was simply too powerful and too well connected – but hadn't broken any laws.'

Sally was impatient. 'That's Buckingham the fascist. Whatever he's up to is aimed at bringing about a right-wing coup. But what about Buckingham personally? As a man?'

Knight shook his head sadly. 'That's where we needed Vera to fill us in. As far as I know, he is wealthy, arrogant, charming and very dangerous. That's what Vera always said.'

After a pause he added, 'Something traumatic happened to Vera when she was undercover – something that broke her and made her paranoid – made her retire. First they'll test you to see if you are one of them. When it comes, it may not be obvious but you'll be closely watched to see if you give yourself away. That's what happened to Vera – they sent her to Germany to collect thousands in cash. What she didn't know then was they shadowed her all the way

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to Germany and she was watched all the time she was there by members of the Anglo-German Bond.

‘Then when the crunch comes they’ll test you again – test you to find out how committed you are – how far you are prepared to go. You’ll have to be prepared to go through with it or you might as well pull out now and save yourself a lot of trouble. It was this second test that broke Vera and told us it was time for us to pull her out and for Special Branch to go in and round up everyone we could lay hands on.’

Sally started doodling on the desk blotter. ‘Vera’s as tough as they come. Whatever it was they dreamed up for her must have been her worst nightmare.’ She threw the pencil down and found she had doodled the masks of comedy and tragedy.

She turned to Mac. ‘What have you got for me?’

Mac produced a series of photostats of Ordnance Survey maps ‘Buckingham has got three locations he owns and from which he sometimes operates. The first is the headquarters of the Society for Psychical Phenomena in Bloomsbury Square where his crackpot members hold their séances and where, at least before the war, the members of the Anglo-German Bond used to meet. I’m assuming we can rule that out as it’s in the likely danger area if a bomb goes off.

‘The second is his London home on Hampstead Heath, Hampstead Manor. This is a relatively modest eight-bedroom house in a couple of acres of grounds looking over London he sometimes uses when he’s in town. Whether this is in the danger area or not, we can’t say for sure, but again he’s unlikely to be in London anyway.

‘The third is his country house and the seat of the Dukes of Buckingham, Ivinghoe Abbey. According to the history books it was originally the site of a medieval abbey but the present building is a Palladian Mansion built in the 1720s as a copy of Palladio's Villa Rotunda. The house is situated in a landscaped park and valley with surrounding pavilions and lodges.’

He produced a pre-war aerial photograph. ‘Ivinghoe Abbey looks all very rustic and ye olde worlde but when you look a bit closer it has all the hallmarks of a high security location. It’s

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surrounded by natural barriers that are easy to police: woodlands and the foothills of the Chiltern hills to the North and Northeast, the Great Ouse to the south and west. You enter along the long drive through woodlands, through pastures where sheep graze. There are no deliveries to the house – a bit of a bone of contention in the village as the last Duke used to shop locally – but no bread, milk, groceries. Letters and newspapers are delivered at the South west lodge gate, Hazlemere House, and then they're taken up to the house by a gamekeeper, but this gamekeeper is wearing military type clothing and rides an ex-army motorbike.

Knight said, 'He could, of course, just be an ex-serviceman.'

'I've got requests out for further details on staff, but it's all a bit late for that now, isn't it? We'll just have to assume the worst and go ahead.'

'What about back up?' Sally wanted to know.

'We've set up several arrangements. We've got an emergency phone line for your sole use and it will be manned 24 hours a day. The number is 111. The GPO has also tapped the phone at Ivinghoe Abbey. That will also be manned round the clock so all you have to do is take the receiver of the hook. If you can't speak, tap morse code for SOS and we'll come in with the heavy mob and get you. I'm going to follow you wherever you go, but it's going to be a long-distance tail. You won't see me and don't try to make contact or you'll compromise yourself.'

'Assuming he takes you to Ivinghoe Abbey, the place is more or less impossible for an outsider to infiltrate, so if you succeed in getting in there, you're going to be on your own – unless and until you call in the cavalry.'

Knight added, 'Once you go ahead with this penetration you will have to see it through to the end. If he suspects even for a second you are not what you seem, he will assume he's been identified and will press the button.'

Sally wasn't sure if Knight was deliberately offering her a way out. His warning came just as she was having the same doubts herself. 'And what about this dinner party tonight? Is it on?'

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‘You’re expected at Lady Cavendish’s charity dinner at 7:30 for 8:00. Buckingham is the guest of honour and an old friend of Margery Cavendish.’

‘What’s my cover story for being there?’

‘You’re representing your mother, the famous travel writer and charity supporter.’

Knight added, ‘One good thing is it gives us a slight reprieve – he’d hardly visit central London if he’s planning to explode a bomb.’

‘Always assuming we’ve got the right man,’ Mac said.

‘And assuming he’s not planning to commit suicide,’ Sally added. Her throat closed up at the thought of the charity dinner and seducing Buckingham. She could feel the tension building in her head and knew she had to say something.

‘To be honest, I’m not sure I’m up to this. It’s a completely different world from the kind of undercover work Mac and I are used to.’

Knight said, ‘You already said you’re no femme fatale. Let me make one thing clear – I definitely do not advocate using sex. By all means use all your feminine wiles – men can be endlessly flattered by the attention of someone like you, as I’m sure you know. But don’t feel you’ve got to sleep with anyone, because it usually has the opposite effect to the one intended. Once a man has slept with you, he’ll tend to lose interest. I hope you don’t mind me being so blunt about it.’

Knight tickled the parrot on his shoulder under the chin and it raised its poll appreciatively. He said, casually, ‘Have you ever had any animals?’

Sally shook her head. ‘We moved around too much when I was a child: first San Diego, then Berlin, then London. I was never able to keep any pets.’

‘There’s one golden rule in dealing with animals, if you want to gain their confidence. You must always let them make the first move – then they’ll trust you. If you make the first move they’re likely to stay wary of you. It’s the same with people. Let them come to you. Once you are in a position of trust, the information you want

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will come to you. You won't have to go poking around and asking questions. That will only arouse suspicion.'

'Suppose they don't come to you?'

'Then you've got to be patient. You're hunting big game, remember. You've got to stake out the bait and wait for them to come after it.'

'The bait being me?'

'I'm afraid so.'

'Is that the advice you gave Vera?'

'It worked well enough for her.'

'The trouble is I don't have time to wait around. I think I'm going to have to break your golden rule.'

'Then you'd better watch your back.' He pointed to the wall clock and added, 'You've got three hours. You'd better get ready.'

Twenty Six

The invitation Knight had engineered for her demanded a serious, full frontal assault on Ma's wardrobe. Lady Margery Cavendish's London charity dinners were the kind of affair covered in detail by the *London Illustrated News* and *Vogue*. She had no wish to stand out unduly but Sally knew she would be facing competition from both eager debutantes and the wealthy matrons of Mayfair with daughters on their hands. She needed to be well turned out.

Rather than attempt to compete with expensive ball gowns, she laid out Ma's Coco Chanel Little Black Dress and her pearls. She knew her height would transform its simplicity into a suitably regal gown for a grand occasion.

She was just about to run a bath when the flat doorbell rang. She answered it, expecting Uncle Gilbert, to find Vera Richmond.

Vera looked even worse than when Sally had seen her last. She had made an attempt to smarten herself up, in what seemed an effort to regain the vivacity she had possessed a decade earlier but the results were disastrous. She bulged in an old trench coat and her brushed hair stuck out like a scarecrow's. Her attempts at applying make-up only added to the scarecrow effect. She struggled with an overnight bag.

She was gasping from the exertion of the stairs and was none too steady on her feet. Sally smelled the familiar reek of Whiskey. 'I got your address out of Max. Can I talk to you? I've been worrying myself bloody sick all day.'

Sally asked her in and showed her into the sitting room. Vera declined the offer of coffee and Sally thought it wiser not to offer her anything else. They sat facing each other on the sofas. 'Max told me the whole bloody story – about the bloody bomb. He warned me

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to leave London. I know he shouldn't have officially. I think he feels guilty about keeping me here in the first place. I'm so frightened now, I don't know what to do. I'm on my way to King's Cross to catch a train. I've got an aunt who lives outside Bradford.'

'Max gave you good advice, Vera. I'd take it if I were you.'

'I think so too. But I had to come and warn you. Try and stop you before it's too bloody late.'

'I appreciate the thought but I'm only doing what you've already done. You were very successful.'

'I did what I did because I was young and brave like you but stupid. The truth is I was excited by being a spy and doing important things. But you don't have to do this. It's very dangerous, far more dangerous than you realise now. Once you get in, you won't be able to get out again. They won't let you. I had the whole of special branch and the Office at my back. All I had to do was make one phone call and they were all arrested. But everyone's leaving London. You'll have no-one to back you up. You'll be all on your bloody own.'

'It's very good of you to worry about me, but I've been trained to look after myself.'

'Yes but these aren't just farm boys serving as Jerry soldiers. They're some of the most dangerous men there are. They're killers. I know because I know what they made me do.'

'Do you want to talk about it?'

'I . . . I told you part of it. How they made me go to Germany to collect all that money. That was the test, you see, to make sure I could be trusted and wouldn't just run away from trouble. They tried to make me do other things, too.' Vera halted, as though physically unable to utter the words. It was obviously something she spoke of rarely if at all. Sally waited, sensing that Vera wanted to talk about whatever it was, despite her reluctance. Moments passed. Captain Honeychurch's chronometer ticked them off faithfully, without judgment. Vera licked her lips several times.

'There was another woman who worked for the Bond – in the Admin. I knew her as Joan. There was something a touch funny about the woman. One day as I was going to get a sandwich for

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lunch, someone stopped me in the street. I could hardly believe my eyes – it was the bloody Gestapo man from Berlin – the man with all the banknotes – Kohler. He pulls me into a shop doorway, cool as you please. He says, “The woman you work with at the Bond, Joan Barton.” So I says, what about her? And he says, “She’s a spy for MI5”.

‘I nearly fainted dead away there and then but I managed to stay calm. I thought at first it was a test to see how I reacted but there was more. Kohler, he says to me, “The whole organisation is in danger. This woman must be eliminated.” I said, what are you talking about? He said, “You know what I am talking about. We must get rid of her.”’

‘Then he said I was to follow her from the office that evening to Tottenham Court Road tube station and stand about 20 feet from her. When the train started coming in I was to wave at her, get her attention and call her over to me. Kohler said he would then “take care of the rest of it”.’

‘I spent almost the whole afternoon in the lav being sick. I knew I was being watched. Buckingham was nowhere to be seen but bloody Kohler came into the office bold as brass and sat in his chair. I couldn’t even look Joan in the face.’

Vera was shaking. Sally crossed over and sat on the sofa beside her. ‘Was this serious – or were they just playing a game with you?’

‘I couldn’t tell whether they meant it or it was just another test of my loyalty. I didn’t have any chance to press the panic button so I had to go through with it – otherwise it could have been me under the train. I did as Kohler had instructed me. I stood on the platform. I waved to Joan. She smiled and started walking toward me as the train was coming in. The next thing I knew she just wasn’t there any more, people were screaming and the train had slammed on its brakes. I never saw Kohler either that night or ever again.’

‘What did you do?’

‘I went straight to a phone box to phone Max, but I couldn’t. It may sound hard to understand but I just couldn’t talk about it to

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him or anyone.’ Vera looked up. ‘You’re the first person I’ve ever told.’

We all have the same secret, Vera. The thing we can’t talk about. The thing we never tell anyone. Alain has blood in his hair. I tried to warn him about the curtains but there was no time.

Aloud she said, ‘Then what did you do?’

I went into the office next morning, half hoping it had all been some kind of test after all and Joan would be there. But as soon as I walked in Buckingham collared me. He said, ‘Oh Vera. The most terrible thing’s happened. Joan’s fallen under a train. The police think it’s suicide.’

‘Was he genuine?’

‘I couldn’t say. I couldn’t tell then and I still can’t now. All I know is he was in bed with the Nazis. There’s no doubt about that. I phoned Max and told him it was time to get me out and wind up the Bond. I didn’t say anything about Joan, but I’m sure he guessed. He must have read the papers. He never mentioned it either.’

Vera pulled herself together. ‘You see what I’m saying –’

‘Believe me I do understand how dangerous these people are and I’m going to be extremely careful.’

‘But it’s not just the physical danger I wanted to warn you about. It’s the stress of living under cover all the time. It builds up gradually, so gradually you don’t notice it at first, you just think you’re having a bad day. But then you have another one and another one. You start to make mistakes. You become clumsy and drop things. You put a kettle on and forget to take it off. Then you start to worry about what else you might have forgotten. And then you start to have nightmares where they catch you and start torturing you to find out how much you know . . . soon you can’t tell which is the nightmare and which is real . . . all you want to do is blurt out the truth and get it over with.’

Sally recognised every one of the symptoms Vera listed, and some she hadn’t. Tension was building in her head and neck again and she wished Vera would stop talking.

‘Look Vera, I very much appreciate you coming here and what you’re trying to do, but I really do know what I’m doing. I

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lived under cover in France, behind Nazi lines, for two years before D-Day. I was arrested and questioned by the Gestapo. I could have been sent to the camps any time like so many SOE people. I do understand what the stress of working under cover is like, believe me.'

Sally regretted being short and remembered that Vera had the knowledge she needed most of all. 'But if you really want to help me, tell me everything you can about Buckingham. Even the smallest detail could be useful once I'm on the inside.'

'That's the other reason I came. I didn't really think I could stop you but I can at least make sure you know what you're getting into.'

'The first thing you need to know about Teddy is he's is an intensely superstitious man. He talks as though he's rational and everything he says sounds reasonable, but deep down he believes he's guided by some higher power. It was all started in Germany long before the war. Hitler and Himmler were believers in the same thing and so was Rudolph Hess. He thinks he and people like him are more highly evolved and are the people of the future.'

'He and the people in the Anglo-German Bond practically worshipped the runes – you know? The old German alphabet? They think it has some mystical power. It was all to do with some German called von List. That's why the SS wore runes as part of that damned black uniform of theirs. The members use them for foretelling the future – at least the inner circle of members do. Even I wasn't allowed to be present in the Rune Chamber when they were holding their séances or whatever it is they got up to – only the Inner Circle.'

'There is some special runic alphabet they use. Some of the women wear bracelets and rings with special runestones in them.'

'I know something about this', Sally said. 'My mother wrote about it once in a book on Scandinavia and the Vikings.' She got up and went to the trinket box on Ma's dressing table. She fished around inside and came back with a silver bracelet on which were mounted five black stones, each with a runic letter carved in it.

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‘My mother gave me this for my birthday when I was ten or eleven. It’s supposed to be my name in runic – only it’s spelled wrong because there isn’t a rune for “y”.’

Vera handled it delicately. ‘I can’t read it, but this is just like the kind of thing I saw on the members. I think you should definitely wear it – you’ll need to give the silver a polish up. And the stones, too.’

‘You don’t think it’s being too obvious? A bit too much of a coincidence? I don’t want to arouse his suspicion.’

‘Believe me he’ll think it’s a sign from the gods or something. He doesn’t believe in coincidences. He’s so arrogant he thinks everything happens because of who he is.’

‘There’s one more thing about him you should know – and maybe can use. He makes a big thing about being of royal descent, even though in reality he’s miles away from the throne. He thinks he should be a king. And I believe he’s looking for someone of royal blood to be his queen.’

‘How on earth do you know that?’

‘He once as good as told me. I had to accompany him to Christie’s auction rooms and bid on his behalf. He bought a painting by Caravaggio – “The Judgement of Paris”. It’s the myth about a shepherd boy who is really a god. He chooses the most beautiful woman in the world – Aphrodite – to be his bride. Buckingham paid a world record price – more than £100,000. In the taxi afterwards I asked him why he had paid so much. He said to me, “That painting has a very personal meaning for me. It’s only when you wake up to who you really are that you can find your true spiritual partner”.’

‘And what did you make of that?’

‘I think he’s what those German doctors call a psychopath. He’s got delusions of grandeur.’

Vera fell silent for a moment or two. ‘One more thing you should know. It’s not just Teddy Buckingham you have to be wary of. His mother, the dowager Duchess is just as bad – worse if anything. She is the most evil one of the lot. People think she murdered her husband, Teddy’s father, because she caught him with one of the maid servants. They say she put strychnine in his brandy.’

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They say he died an agonising death and was cremated on the estate without a post mortem. I got that straight from the old cook who mysteriously retired to the Bahamas soon afterwards. These people think they're above the law. They're probably right – they are.

'I've said too much already. I didn't intend to scare you. I just wanted to . . . wanted to . . . You're very brave. Meeting you made me realise how much of my self-respect I'd lost and that I'd better do something about getting it back before it's too late. I wanted to thank you for that.'

Sally rose to see her out, 'You know what worries me most about this business? What the hell am I going to do if he doesn't take a shine to me? I'm no seductress – I wouldn't even know how.'

Vera got up. 'The thing that worries me most is that you are exactly his type.'

Twenty Seven

Sally heard the bath water splashing on the floor and raced to turn off the overflowing taps. What was it Vera had said? You forget things – then you wonder what else you've forgotten.

She let some of the water out before climbing in, lay back and tried to relax her aching muscles. For two years in France, much of her time was spent trying to wipe away the grime of being on the run with nothing more than a pail of cold water or a farmyard trough. To climb into a hot bath was still her greatest luxury. But she had been so busy calming Vera's nerves she had completely ignored the swelling chorus of warning voices in her own head. Now they insisted on making themselves heard.

If Buckingham was really behind the plot to detonate a bomb in a populated area then he must be a psychopath as Vera claimed. If, on the other hand, he was merely a self-deluding aristocrat feeling sorry for himself as Maxwell Knight believed, then she was wasting her time – time that was quickly running out.

'I'm not persuaded you're on the right track with Buckingham,' Knight had said, 'but the slippery sod has got a lot to answer for, so if you can get anything on him, there'll be no-one happier than me. But watch your step. He's nobody's fool. Vera is convinced he's very dangerous but I don't think she's able to be objective any more.'

So what was he? Mass murderer or deranged lunatic? At least with Nazis in occupied France you knew where you were. You kept quiet and got on with the sabotage. This job was something very different: get inside a potential terrorist gang, find out

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everything there is to know without getting herself caught and stop them setting the thing off and destroying the city.

She was still trying to relax when the phone bell rang in the sitting room. She dragged herself out reluctantly, grabbed a bath towel and padded through to answer it dripping on the carpet as she went.

‘Frobisher three seven oh.’

‘Honeychurch? It’s Stanhope here.’

‘Hello, Colonel.’

‘Make it Peter. I’ve . . . I’ve just heard from Mackenzie what you’re planning. I wanted to say it’s a hell of a brave thing you’re doing. I want you to know that I and my paras are one hundred per cent behind you, if you need us.’

‘Thanks, Peter. That means a lot to me. I was starting to feel a bit like I’m fighting a losing battle on my own.’

‘Look. I may have said some things in the past. The point is . . . the point is, one is only human after all. If anyone can get inside this rat’s nest, I’d back you to do it any day. I wish I had a hundred more like you in my regiment.’

‘I think the War Office will have to change the rules quite a bit before that happens.’

‘Well, anyway. I wanted you to know we’re right behind you. I’ll be waiting personally until I get your call. Don’t take any unnecessary risks, that’s all I wanted to say.’

She smiled to herself as she replaced the receiver. The Colonel was human after all. When she’d hung up she decided to forget about the bath, towelled herself dry and lay naked on the counterpane of her bed, gazing at the plaster ceiling rose and the pink floral lampshade. Perhaps an hour’s sleep would clear her mind before evening, but sleep also refused to come. Instead of relaxing, she could feel all her muscles involuntarily tensing more.

She had a dress, she had a possible bait, the only problem was she lacked everything else she needed; weapons, equipment, support and, most of all, friends on the ground.

The 0.25-inch calibre Beretta that the members of FREELANCE had given her as a farewell present and as a thank

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you was perfect. It was a beautiful little automatic that fitted easily even into an evening purse or coat pocket, liberated from a Nazi general. It didn't pack much of a punch, but it could put a man down at 10 yards. But much as she would have loved to take it with her this evening, it was too much of a risk. One casual search and it would be all over. She daren't even take her knuckleduster. If it came to a rough house, she'd have to improvise, as she'd been taught.

What else did she have? Her cover was the best you can have – your own story. I did my bit in the ATS as a driver and now I teach languages and gym. Anyone can check it; it's bang up to date; and all the documents check. That at least was solid – she could tell the truth until the cows come home and no-one could trip her up.

Somehow the voice inside her head was slowly acquiring a Scottish accent, as her time at SOE's Arisaig school came back into focus, and Sergeant 'Mad Mac' Mackenzie explained to his latest batch of raw recruits what they were up against.

'When you're undercover, you're not like a soldier – he has plenty of mates around him. You've got no-one. Not one single soul you can trust. You can't be certain of those who say they're your friends, or people of your own sort, or people who are kind to you. You have no way of knowing who they are loyal to. You're like a caveman in the jungle – all you've got is your eyes, your ears and your brain.'

'But even when you're surrounded by potential danger on all sides, do you know what the biggest danger of all is? It's getting over-confident because you can't see anyone watching you, or suspecting you or testing you, and thinking you're in the clear when you're really in the shit – up to your neck.'

What Mac had neglected to explain was that it wasn't the Nazis who were the worst. It was some of the French people. The Maquis in Orvault had put her in a flat in an old couple's cottage, two doors from the town bakery. At first she was nervous at being somewhere so central but the network leader's reasoning was that the Jerries visited the bakery every morning to pick up their bread, so they would be unlikely to suspect the place. Neither the baker nor

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his wife knew the lodger two doors away was anything other than the local teacher. From the first morning when she went to collect the bread, it was obvious the baker fancied her. He took his time wrapping the sticks of bread, making jokes about how he wished he had married a blonde, under the eye of his wife, taking the cash.

By the second week, his jokes had become less funny and he had become a pest. As soon as she appeared in the shop he would come round the counter to hand her the bread personally and insisted on planting lingering kisses her on the cheeks, claiming her as, 'My long lost cousin' as she looked so like his cousin, 'Mirabelle'. The only 'marvel' would be if he actually had a cousin. All this took place under the watchful eye of the baker's wife who spent all day sitting sour-faced in the wooden caisse, keeping the books. Sally's instincts warned her about his escalating behaviour but she dared not simply move on without a good reason in case that provoked questions both for her and the network.

In the third week, the Gestapo called at the house, asked to see her papers and arrested her. She was taken to the Hotel de Ville which was now headquarters of both the criminal police, the Kripo, and the State police. They put her in a cell alone, without food or drink and kept her overnight. The stink was gut-wrenching and she spent half the night wondering if the screams she could hear down the corridor were those of anyone she knew – and if she was next on the list for interrogation. In the morning, two guards brought her before an overweight Major in his SS uniform and she stood in front of his desk, trying to control the tremor in her hands and face. He looked at her papers, looked up at her and looked back at her papers again, picking his teeth with a fingernail. His teeth were pointed, she noticed, like those of an animal: a dog or a wolf. His uniform was black.

Her papers passed his scrutiny because they were perfect forgeries, most of them using the correct blanks stolen from the Nazis. But the fact her papers were in order didn't satisfy him.

'Why did you move from Bordeaux, Mamselle?'

'Because I was offered the job here in Orvault.'

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‘Did you have any trouble with the police in Bordeaux? Don’t lie to me – we can easily check.’

‘No, sir. I have never been in trouble with the police.’

‘Not even for breaking up families? We have a witness who says you flirt a little too openly with the married men of the village.’

The penny dropped with this remark. She was flooded with relief as she realised the baker’s wife had got fed up with her husband’s behaviour and had denounced her – probably anonymously. That was how most collaborators and fascist Frenchmen did it, she’d been told. Just mail one untraceable letter with a name and perhaps an address and you had rid yourself of an old enemy whose politics were suspect, all for the price of a stamp. If you happened to owe them a lot of money then, that was a bonus. Or, in this case, if it got rid of an attractive, troublesome young blonde, then so much the better. When she was returned to her cell, her relief was replaced by anger and she found herself clenching and unclenching her fists when she thought of what the baker’s wife had put her through and how, had the SS tortured her, she might have talked.

When the SS Major let her go next morning, with a pious warning about the sanctity of marriage, Sally went straight to the bakery. As soon as the shop was empty of customers, she went in and gave lover boy a black eye, which sent him squealing into the back room, locking the door behind him. She picked up two loaves, went to the caisse and put the right money into the wooden cup. As the woman reached for the coins she grasped her wrist and held it. ‘If you ever denounce me again I will kill you. If I’m arrested, I’ll have you killed.’

Nothing was ever said again either by the baker or his wife. Later on in the war she came to think of it as a good thing. It had meant she never relaxed and dropped her guard for a single second, day or night. They said Monty kept a photo of Rommel over his bed so his worst enemy was always with him. For her it was the baker’s wife whose picture she resolved to keep always in her mind’s eye from now on.

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The only problem was that never relaxing or dropping your guard was what made you end up seeing things that weren't there – like seeing black dogs out of the corner of your eye. What was it Dr Fisher had called it? Battle fatigue? Being scared to death might be closer to the truth.

Her eyes travelled to the little brown glass bottle on the bedside table, with the pills Dr Fisher had given her 'in case she saw too many black dogs'. She was under no illusions about what they were. Plenty of people she had fought alongside in the war had a pocketful of little pills 'just to keep them going'. These were 'uppers' too. So far they had remained untouched – a symbol of her determination to solve her own problems and not look for easy solutions out of a bottle. But now she was going into battle again. Maybe now the time had come to put them to use?

Her folding alarm clock on the bedside table began ringing, signalling that the hands were almost at seven. She had only an hour to put on the show of her life and decided that the time had arrived.

Twenty Eight

Number 27 Princes Gate proved to be a vast four-storey, cream painted Regency town house off Knightsbridge, overlooking Hyde Park, its tall curved windows blazing with light as she pulled up in the Alvis and parked outside. Sally stood gazing up at the brilliant, glittering façade feeling alone in a foreign landscape as daunting as any night-time parachute rendezvous behind enemy lines.

The butler who opened the door had the look of a man who had already resigned himself to the indignity of a Labour Government and so conducted her with a suitably egalitarian air to where the party was taking place in a library so long it had two fireplaces.

Sally found some twenty or more dinner guests already deep in conversation in the library, and already one or two glasses of champagne ahead of her. She recognised many faces from politics and the military world she had previously seen on Pathé Newsreels at the cinema and in photos in magazines.

Buckingham was the tallest man in the room and, she reluctantly admitted to herself, by far the best looking. He had stationed himself in a proprietorial stance in front of the nearest ornate marble fireplace, one foot on the fender, and was surrounded by adoring young women, shamelessly competing for his attention. The thought she was planning to use the same display of submissiveness herself caused her a shudder of revulsion. But she had the satisfaction of seeing his head turn in her direction, along with others, and his eyes follow her as she entered the room. She sensed, rather than saw, his gaze continue to remain on her as she was greeted by her hostess, Lady Margery Cavendish.

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Her choice of Ma's Coco Chanel Little Black Dress and her pearls had been perfect, as she had planned. Her height transformed its simplicity into a regal gown and she had taken some trouble putting her blonde hair up into a French pleat, making her look even taller. If anything, she looked more exotic and fascinating than the simpering debutantes, powder-puff bright and eager to please, anxious in their expensively tailored gowns.

Lady Margery greeted her with a look of approval, took her by the arm and led her to a group that included Averell Harriman, the new U.S. ambassador, several U.S. and British military figures and their wives. As they walked the length of the reception room, she said, 'Max tells me your father is a naval man, my dear, so I'm putting you with the soldiers and sailors – you'll just have to put up with military talk, like the rest of us.'

Her hostess introduced her briefly and left. The men nodded politely and immediately resumed their conversation – denouncing the perfidy of the Russians and their impudence in trying to plant a bugged wood carving of the United States Seal on Harriman during his time at the residence in Moscow.

In the present situation, the talk of politics and diplomacy sounded like the chattering of magpies. She only half-listened as she looked around the room, mentally checking off the faces she recognised. There was no-one from the big briefing in Broadway so there was probably no-one present who knew of the emergency. The drone of earnest conversation flitted across the surface of her mind as she looked around as casually as she could manage at Buckingham and his fan club. Attempting to shoehorn her way into the adoring group around him would be like diving into a pack of hyenas preparing to devour their prey. But she had the satisfaction of seeing him look up and their eyes meeting briefly as she continued to scan the room.

Towards the end of the library was the entrance to the dining room through which they all would ritually process in a few minutes time. Against all protocol, she slipped quietly away and wandered unobtrusively through the double doors into the sparkling and lavish dining salon, designed by someone who appeared to be an admirer

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of the excesses of Marie Antoinette and a lover of red plush gilt and burgundy velvet drapery.

She wandered around the table looking at place names and located the seat laid for their Hostess. Next to Lady Cavendish was the guest of honour, Edward, Duke of Buckingham. And next to him the Hon. Miss Deidre Philpot. Her own seat was several places away. The Honourable Miss Philpot was no doubt one of the bright young things clinging onto Buckingham's every word. Sally felt the country's interest could better be served by not inflicting her upon the guest of honour this evening.

She picked up her own place name and was in the process of exchanging it with the bright Miss Philpot's when Margery Cavendish stepped into the room. It was obvious now that she had been standing in the doorway for some moments, watching, and waiting to see what Sally would do next.

'I thought I would make a better dinner companion'

Lady Cavendish smiled. 'I couldn't agree with you more, my dear. I threw Deidre to the old lecher to save myself from him all evening. But you look as though you know how to take care of yourself. You'll do perfectly. We'll just leave things as they are, shall we?'

She turned to go. 'But let me give you a word of warning. Teddy Buckingham is not like other men and is certainly no gentleman. Be careful what you wish for.' As she said this, she allowed the shoulder of her evening gown to slip down, momentarily revealing several red weals across her back that could only have been inflicted by a whip. She hooked her shoulder strap back up. 'Shall we rejoin the others? Carlyle will be announcing dinner in a few minutes.'

Sally swallowed hard and found her mouth suddenly dry. She took a swig from her champagne glass and followed her hostess back into the reception room.

When they were called in to dinner, Buckingham took his seat beside her but gave her only a brief nod of acknowledgement, and thereafter devoted himself for the entire first course to Margery Cavendish on his left. The Tory politician on her other side was too

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engrossed in telling his neighbour how he planned to win the next general election to bother with her. Sally picked pessimistically at the *Salade Italienne*, feeling her attempts at being a seductress had failed before they had begun. But the moment the first course was cleared away by liveried footmen, Buckingham turned at once to Sally, gazed directly into her eyes and enveloped her in an intensely personal smile. He said, 'Forgive me for ignoring you – I've just had to endure a ritual tongue-lashing from our hostess warning me not to lead you astray and corrupt you.'

Teddy Buckingham in the flesh was a hundred times more charismatic than any of his photos. The greying hair at his temples gave him the distinguished air of a judge or diplomat while his eyes, pale like her own, held the mystery of both lover and magician. He radiated under-stated power. Sally felt herself responding involuntarily to his warmth and unashamed affection with an intensely personal and natural smile of her own. Every atom of intuition told her she had already done the one thing she had been trained for years never to do – dropped her guard completely and allowed a warm glow to take its place.

'And there was me thinking this was just another charity dinner – I had no idea corruption was on the menu.'

He sat back in his seat and smiled with obvious relish. 'And there was *me* afraid I was going to be stuck with another of Margery's simpering idiots all evening. There's more to you than meets the eye – Miss . . .'

He picked up the place setting card in front of her and read it. 'I met a Honeychurch before the war. American navy chap. At the U.S. embassy.'

'My father. He's still in the navy, but not in London any more.'

'Are you in the navy, Honeychurch? You look like you'd liven the buggers up a bit.'

She shook her head. 'I teach languages to nice girls. In Guildford.'

'How do you know Margery?'

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‘I’m a friend of a friend. Frankly, I think I’m only here to make up the numbers. How about you? What brings you here?’

‘I had something very important to take care of in Town. But it’s all sorted out now, so I can relax for a few minutes and play the honoured guest.’

He paused for a moment as though weighing her up. ‘Do you know anything about genetics?’

Sally rotated the stem of her wine glass between her fingers, focussing on the circles she made in the white table linen, trying but failing to find some meaning in the question. ‘I know tall pea plants have tall offspring and short pea plants have short ones. Is that what you mean?’

‘You and I are the tall pea plants. We are genetically similar.’

‘And that’s a good thing?’

‘It’s a fact of nature – something that can’t be changed by politicians like our friends here, or the military men, either. But it’s a fact that’s been ignored for too long in this damned country.’

He caught sight of the bracelet round her wrist and abruptly changed the subject. ‘That’s a most unusual jewel – May I ask where you got it?’

‘My mother gave it to me when I was a child. I think she got it in Norway or somewhere in Scandinavia. It’s my name. But it’s spelled wrong because these are runic letters, you see. S – A – L – L – I.’

He smiled patiently. ‘I’m very familiar with the runic alphabet. And your name certainly isn’t spelled wrong.’

He took her wrist in his hand and the dark stones in his fingers and stared at them for a short while before laying them tenderly back on her wrist. His hand felt very hot.

‘Did you know the runes can be used as a method of divination?’

‘You mean like astrology and palmistry?’

‘No I don’t mean like astrology and palmistry – that’s superstitious nonsense. I mean that if you know the correct way to

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go about it, the runic alphabet can give you astonishingly accurate predictions about your destiny.’

‘I find that kind of thing rather hard to accept – ‘

‘I grant you it sounds like the same nonsense the crystal-ball brigade spout but it is far from being the same. The world around us is connected in ways we cannot see because we lack the senses, but the connections are there just the same and can be revealed by the right scientific approach.’

‘I’m afraid you’ve lost me completely.’

‘Let me give you an example. Did you know in the Pacific Ocean there are many chains of small islands?’

‘You mean like the Hawaiian islands? I’ve visited those.’

‘Exactly so. Now, you might think it a strange coincidence there are so many chains of small islands in that part of the world – but that’s because you live on the surface. If you lived underwater like a fish, you’d know that on the floor of the Pacific there are several long mountain chains, and the islands are simply the peaks of those mountains. It’s not a coincidence at all – it’s just that you can’t see the connection that links them because it’s out of sight. The world around you is the same. There are no coincidences. You have to learn to see the connections – ‘

‘Or learn to swim underwater.’

He placed his hand on hers, and his face glowed in admiration. Once again she felt the heat. ‘Would you like to learn to swim underwater?’

‘Does it involve me taking my clothes off?’

‘Not at all. You mustn’t listen to what Margery says about me. I’m simply offering to prove to you the runes can answer important questions you have about yourself.’

She didn’t answer, not sure exactly what his invitation meant, if anything.

‘That was rather clumsy of me. Let me explain. There’s a place here in London, not far from here, in Bloomsbury Square. It’s an organisation I run called the Society for Psychical Phenomena. Come there with me and I’ll cast the runes for you.’

‘What now? At this time of night?’

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‘What difference does that make? Your destiny is your destiny. Aren’t you curious? I know I am.’

Half of her mind wanted to leap at the invitation, whatever it entailed, as the very thing she had set out to achieve. The other half hesitated to submit to a technique that promised to ‘reveal the truth’ – it sounded too much like a visit to Gestapo headquarters for comfort.

Perhaps sensing her resistance, Buckingham said, ‘Let me be completely honest. I’ve been trying hard all evening not to scare you off, but I’ve thought about nothing but you since you first walked into the room. You are a unique woman. Come with me now and find out how unique. I predict you will make a great discovery about yourself. One that could change your life.’

‘I’ve heard a lot of pick-up lines from a lot of men in the past few years but this is one I’ve never heard before. But then I’ve never met someone like you before. How can I say no?’

They waited until the main course was finished and sat through a tedious speech from the U.S. ambassador, about the need for America to have its own foreign intelligence service modelled on Britain’s SIS, before making their excuses for going early and taking their leave of their hostess. As Buckingham waited at the dining room door, Lady Cavendish took her arm and said in a low voice, ‘I somehow thought you’d find Teddy’s “on” button and give it a push. I think you can look after yourself but remember what I said. He doesn’t play by any normal rules. He makes his own.’

As she left the dining room, Sally felt several pairs of envious eyes drilling maliciously into the back of her head, wishing her to fail.

Twenty Nine

The egalitarian butler held the door for them as they exited onto Princes gate. Buckingham pointed a short distance along the road to a cream Hispano-Suiza Tourer, the most expensive car in Europe and worth ten years' of her salary, parked under a lamp post. A uniformed police constable stood discreetly by, keeping an eye on the VIP vehicle.

He said, 'We can take my car.'

'It's all right, I've got my Alvis parked here.'

Buckingham didn't hesitate as he walked to his car and opened the door wide. 'Ride with me. Leave your car here – One of my people will pick it up for you.' He smiled widely. 'I am, and always will be, a gentleman. I promise you.'

Sally gave in to his insistence and climbed into the deeply luxurious cream leather seat. After all, this is why I'm here. She kept tight hold of the evening bag on her lap – then remembered she had left her brass knuckles at home. She was on her own.

Buckingham held out his hand. 'Let me have your keys. I'll get one of my people to pick it up for you.'

Sally took the keys out of her bag and hesitated. Her house keys were on the same key ring. If she took them off would it make her look suspicious of him? She handed him the whole bunch. He put them in his pocket as he sat behind the wheel.

The police constable saluted as they drove off into the night, heading north.

'What do I call you? Your Royal Personage, or something?'

He threw his head back and laughed loud. 'Stick that. All the royal mumbo jumbo is for coronations and for the lickspittles who

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love bowing and scraping. They can't get enough of it. I think some of them would secretly like a good thrashing.'

'Good. Because I'm a bit too tall for curtseying.'

'So, what have you heard about me? What has Margery told you? That I'm the most wicked man in England? That I eat baby's brains for breakfast and keep my women chained up in my dungeon? If I did half the things people say I've done, I'd have been locked up years ago, I can assure you. I'm afraid there's an awful lot of jealousy in this world. If you've got money, and position and a royal title then people can't wait to see you fail. And if you don't fail, they just make up stories about you anyway. And that's if you're a man. If you're a woman, then it's twice as hard and twice as unfair – you must find that with your looks.'

Sally glanced behind. The Ford station wagon that had pulled away from the kerb in Knightsbridge as they turned out of Princes Gate was still behind them, driving on sidelights only. 'I don't want to worry you but I think someone is following us.'

'You're unusually observant.'

Sally shifted in her seat. Had she slipped-up?

'Don't worry so much,' he laughed. 'They're just for my personal protection.'

'Why do you need a bodyguard?'

'It's just a precaution. As I say there is a lot of jealousy in the world.'

Sally openly studied him as he sat at the wheel, gripping it in a strong and capable pair of hands. Street lamps periodically illumined his face as they passed, showing a formidable and determined profile. The papers often said he could pass as a twin for the Duke of Windsor – the two Eddies, playboy royals out to have fun with the world, and she could see all that and a more serious purposefulness, too.

'Like what you see?'

'You're very attractive.'

'As are you. Tell me, have you ever had your family tree traced? Your pedigree?'

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‘I’ve been asked that question before. I’ve had plenty of guesses but no actual research. So far they tell me I’m somewhere between a Viking and a Red Indian.’

He laughed. ‘I’d say it was pretty obvious you are pure Anglo Saxon. Tall, flaxen hair, pale coloured eyes. What else could you be but a warrior? Perhaps you have descended from a warrior queen, or from Wagner’s Rhine Maidens, have you considered that?’

‘Wouldn’t that make me "thoughtless, elemental, only half-real"? If I remember rightly?’

‘*Ach so.* You know your Wagner! *Ausgezeichnet.*’

He beamed with pleasure as though he were personally responsible for uncovering this trifling memory, somehow dredged up from a Covent Garden opera programme. She made a note to thank Ma for forcing her to sit through the Ring Cycle as a teenager.

From Wagner and Shakespeare and Tolstoy he kept up a constant stream of witty and amusing conversation – the kind of conversation men make, she thought, when they’ve just met a beautiful woman, can hardly believe their luck, and are afraid of allowing even a moment’s awkward silence to break the spell and let the fish wriggle off the hook.

As they drove across the late night London streets, he was full of malicious observations on politics, making fun of everyone and everything, especially the ministers of the recently-elected Labour government. ‘Take Attlee, our new Prime Minister. By all accounts, he’s a very modest man – but then he has a great deal to be modest about. There’s that crooked little fixer Herbert Morrison. Do you know what Ernest Bevin says about Morrison – about his own Deputy Prime Minister? “I wouldn’t trust the little bugger any further than I could throw him.” That’s what he told the chap from the *Daily Herald*. Then there’s the Welshman, Aneurin Bevan. He’s the most intelligent of the lot. Completely wasted trying to put together a Soviet-style welfare state against all the odds.’

‘I take it you’d rather have Mr Churchill back in Downing Street?’

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‘That old fraud? Good lord no. I’d rather have Commissar Attlee and the Soviet Republic of Great Britain any day – at least they’re honest about what they’re trying to do, not fomenting wars with the few friends we’ve got left in this God-forsaken world.’

Every time he spoke about politics and politicians, Buckingham became more animated and emotional, and less rational and forthcoming. She was only going to get anywhere with the cooler, more rational side of his volatile personality. ‘You asked about my pedigree earlier. What exactly is that all about?’

‘The thing that marks you out from the masses is genetic. It’s not a coincidence you are tall, blonde and regal looking – it’s in your breeding. You almost certainly have royal blood, like me. We are probably distantly related.’

‘Aren’t we all related if you go back far enough?’

‘Yes but we don’t all have royal blood running in our veins. I do and so do you. You must have felt this, when you look around you at the pathetic placeholders who have wormed their way into positions of power at the expense of real talent, real energy, real courage.’

She had discovered the arrogance and the waspishness she had been warned about, but where is the dangerous madman everyone keeps telling me about? A phrase of her mother’s came back to her when she saw his wicked, boyish grin, “He was at home with himself”. She found it impossible to imagine Teddy ever lying on Dr Freud’s couch tearfully telling of a tormented past. As her tension and fear relaxed, her perception of Teddy Buckingham was slowly but surely slipping into two separate images, like the double-sided make-up mirror in her purse. Sally, the SOE agent who had survived a dozen fire fights and Gestapo hunts was still watchful and vigilant from afar, but Sally the woman was attracted despite herself. She could see herself stepping into a close up with that dazzling, boyish smile and made a mental note to keep her distance.

She also experienced something else: the something they had warned her against in basic training. At first, you’ll be accepted without question. You’ll think how easy it is to fit in here in

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occupied France, behind enemy lines. That's when you'll drop your guard and forget to take care.

'I'm right aren't I?' He persisted. 'You have always felt you were different from other people? An outsider?'

She was still weighing her answer and deciding how honest to be with him and with herself, when they turned into Bloomsbury Square and pulled up in front of one of the Georgian houses that ringed the square. She glanced back and saw the Ford station wagon had stopped 50 yards behind.

'This is it. welcome to the Society for Psychical Phenomena.'

They parked outside and Buckingham produced a large, ornate key – larger and more complex than ordinary security keys. He unlocked the double-width black-painted door and held it wide for her to enter.

'This is where we find out all your guilty secrets.'

Thirty

The Georgian exterior was as undistinguished as the houses either side, a few still private homes of the wealthy but many now having sunk so low as to become publishers or medical practices. The only distinguishing sign was a blackened brass plate, inscribed 'Society for Psychological Phenomena, London' in Victorian copperplate, once subjected to years of industrious polishing, now neglected and practically illegible.

As soon as Buckingham unlocked the street door and switched on the ancient lights, Sally saw that this faded outside was a sophisticated form of camouflage to mislead the curious and the profane. The interior was exotic, opulent and rich. The dominant aesthetic of the entrance hall was that of the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood and William Morris's Arts and Crafts movement that Ma raved about. He extended an arm, inviting her to enter first: inviting her to step out of London's grey austerity into another world – his world.

The floors were fine polished parquet, covered by silk carpets from the east. The walls were lined with a nineteenth century version of linen-fold panelling and hung with paintings by Walter Crane and Gabriel Dante Rossetti, showing mythological figures. Above a carved wooden fireplace hung Caravaggio's *The Judgement of Paris*.

Entry to the inner sanctum of the Society was through an archway, guarded by a tapestry depicting a dragon, tamed by a red-haired maiden, and by a pen and ink drawing of an elderly man wearing a long beard and medieval cap. Over the archway were

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inscribed in Gothic gilt letters the words ‘The Future Has Yet to be Written.’ It was obvious from the care lavished on the place that Buckingham and the society treated it with the reverence usually reserved by religious believers for their temple.

‘Do you bring all your women here?’

‘On the contrary. I bring very few people here – and normally no-one who isn’t already a member of our inner circle.’ Truth was in his voice. ‘I may be an amoral reprobate – yes, I know what Margery Cavendish thinks and says about me – but the occult world is something I take every seriously, and I’m far from alone in that. There are plenty of educated and enlightened people who share my view. Many of them are members of the Society. We have scientists, too – I think you’d be surprised. We are not steeped in medieval ignorance – we are scientific rationalists.’

‘Who’s the man in the portrait? Your founder?’

‘Our group here happens to be dedicated to the memory and the work of a very great philosopher and worker with the occult, Guido von List. He’s the man who correctly predicted the Franco-Prussian war of 1870 and the formation of the German empire in 1871. He made a number of other important predictions. I’d like to tell you about them some time – when you are in a more receptive mood.’

Sally merely screwed her face up in a sceptical grimace.

He smiled. ‘I gather you think the runes are just superstitious nonsense but it’s really very important to me. I’d take it as a personal favour if you would treat this seriously. I have very good reasons for thinking this is more than just superstition.’

He led her through the arch, under the austere eye of the dragon-slaying maiden, into a small chamber, with side lighting only, and comparatively little ornamentation. In the geometric centre of a specially woven carpet was a round table with a burgundy chenille cover, surrounded by five red plush and gilt armchairs.

He bade her sit at the table, removed and folded the chenille covering to reveal a dark green coloured baize underneath. He opened a drawer in the table and reverently took out a heavy circular disc made from black marble, and a leather-bound book. He placed

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them on the table. Around the edge of the plate were eighteen indentations, each holding a polished stone of some black, shiny stone, and each engraved with a runic symbol.

‘This is the Runic Circle of the *Armanen Futharkh*’, he explained. ‘Most people today imagine these are merely some primitive precursor of modern alphabets. What they do not understand is they are in fact the encoded history of an ancient and powerful system of knowledge that enables the student to see and understand the occult world all around us. This understanding is thanks to Guido von List who interpreted the Old Norse *Havamal* contained in the Codex Regius from the Viking age. He also was the first scholar to understand and interpret the *Eddas*. Using these ancient texts he was able to reconstruct this, the primary runic alphabet.’

She nodded sagely at this mumbo–jumbo as though recognising true wisdom when she heard it. His next statement was more personal. He took four of the rune stones from the disc and placed them in order on the table. She recognised at once the runes from the bracelet she wore. ‘These are the runes of your name here.’

She picked up one of the stones. ‘These look very much like the runes the Nazis used on their uniforms, don’t they?’

‘Yes, unfortunately the Nazis were among von List’s most ardent followers but we cannot blame the master for the failings of his pupils. After all one wouldn’t want to stop listening to Wagner’s sublime operas simply because his name and his image were perverted and abused.’

‘But in any case, these runes predate the Nazis by many hundreds of years. Let me interpret them for you. You have four runes, with one repeated. They are Sowilo or Sun – this means success. Next is Ansuz, that means one of the Aesir – they’re the gods and goddesses who live in Asgard, one of the Nine Worlds in the branches of the world-tree Yggdrasil. This means vitality – life itself. Next is Laguz, repeated. That is perhaps the most interesting. In its first occurrence it means formlessness or chaos. In its second occurrence its meaning shifts subtly to potentiality. And then finally

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Ingwaz. This is another god name, meaning the actualization of potential.

‘Okay so what does that all mean in English?’

‘Sally, if I tell you the sacred and occult meaning of your name you won’t believe me. But perhaps you will believe Guido von List.’

He handed her the well-worn leather-bound volume, removed a silken bookmark and pointed to a paragraph that had already been underlined. It read,

Of all name and number combinations that we have considered, the most powerful must surely be that of Sowilo-Ansuz-Laguz-Ingwaz, signifying Success-Life-Chaos-Actualization, the fundamental pattern of life according to the *Eddas*. This transcendent formula could be exceeded only by a double appearance of Laguz signifying the fully transformative sequence of Success-Life-Chaos-Potential-Actualization. Such a rare being, if she existed, would possess virtual power of life, death and resurrection, According to the *Havamal* or “Sayings of the High One” as interpreted by The Armanen Order.

Sally felt an odd prickling sensation in her scalp and on her arms. At first she suspected he was playing some conjuring trick on her, showing her a personal message that had been prepared in advance. But the book was clearly many decades old and its binding intact. No-one could have known in advance about the bracelet her mother bought years before. This ancient writer seemed to have made his prediction before she was even born. She had feared her bracelet would be seen as a cheap gypsy’s trick: now she found that somehow the trick was on her.

‘What does it mean?’

‘It means you’re unique. So am I. Genetically we are one in a million. We’re two of a kind, you and I. And it’s no coincidence we have met – and met just now at the most important moment of my life so far. It has been in your destiny all along, waiting for you

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to discover it. The runes show that. They show clearly you were destined for greatness. Haven't you always felt you were created to do something great thing? Hasn't it always been there inside you, urging you to be different, to stand out from the common herd, while the common herd is content to remain safely anonymous and hidden among the mob?'

'Hold on a moment. I like to think I'm not just the girl next door, but I'm not exactly the Queen of Sheba, either.'

'Aren't you? Are you sure? Your trouble is you spend too much time with ordinary people. You are exceptional, you know you are. But you haven't yet attained your potential. You are not yet ready to see yourself as I see you – as you really are.'

'People told me you were just an idle playboy. I didn't expect an articulate intellectual, much less a philosopher.'

He pointed to the passage in the book. 'These words are not mine. They were already marked before we arrived. In fact it was marked for me some years ago by a psychic mentor. My full given family name is Edward Bertrand Sali Hazlemere. We share more than just genes. We also share a runic name.'

She had been warned he was a man wedded to superstitious beliefs, but now he seemed also to be man wedded to some deeper principles. She just couldn't discern what principles they were.

He said, 'When you are gifted, people become jealous and accuse you of arrogance. I find it is better not to show too much. I'm willing to bet you have found the same in your life.'

Once again, the accuracy of his observation was a revelation. She knew she was brighter than most of the men around her but had learned years ago that it didn't pay to advertise that superiority as it merely generated resentment. He said, 'Will you do one more thing for me? Will you cast the runes yourself? Then we will both see whether this is merely coincidence or not.'

'What do you want me to do?'

'Gather all the runes in your hands. Cast them in a north-south direction, towards north – that's the gold arrowhead on the edge of the table. You should ask the runes a specific question in

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your mind and hold that question in your heart as you cast them, keeping your quest to yourself.’

‘I don’t see how throwing some stones on a table can tell us anything. It’s completely irrational.’

‘If you insist on a rational explanation then tell yourself these stones are nothing more than a means of focusing on your deepest unconscious mind that is usually concealed even from yourself.’

Sally gathered up the rune stones, cupping them in two hands and held them, trying to focus her mind, not believing in divination yet hesitating on the edge of a new and perhaps dangerous world. The smooth black stones felt alive: did that make them capable of giving her away? Should she silently ask the stones a question that might reveal her real purpose, betray her to Buckingham through some mind-reading party trick? Or should she focus on something bland and unrevealing? She found her own instincts made up her mind for her: as she cast the stones the words blazed in her mind: Will Buckingham destroy London?

She cast the runes as directed towards the north. Immediately he smiled with satisfaction. ‘That is in itself very rare.’ He pointed to the stones as they had fallen. ‘The reason we cast on a north–south axis is to give the runes a direction. If a stone is reversed, that can have a negative meaning. For all eighteen to fall positive is unique in my experience. It is like cutting the Ace of Spades eighteen times in a row in a random shuffle.’

Sally was silent. Her whole life had been spent in the mundane world of travel, adventure, danger. It had never occurred to her there could be an unseen world or that it could have any real impact on her life. She had taken it for granted that Buckingham’s obsession was just a fantasy. Now she felt less sure, and a slight shiver ran through her as she looked around her, almost expecting to see something or someone she had failed to notice before. ‘What does that mean?’

‘I believe these runes mean you are destined to play a great part in my affairs and in affairs of state. But I also see death here. That is a warning it would be foolish to ignore.’

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‘When you say you see death, what exactly do you mean? Should I be worried?’ She hadn’t forgotten her mission. But now her question also had a personal significance.

‘Not at all, I certainly didn’t mean to alarm you. But tell me, on this subject, have you ever killed a man?’

The unexpected question brought back with great clarity the hatred on the face of the SS major who had killed Alain: hatred that turned to fear and then shock as she levelled the Sten and fired a whole magazine into his chest.

‘I see the answer clearly in your face.’

‘Yes, I have killed a man. I’m not proud of it, but I neither am I ashamed.’

‘That is what I would expect from a woman of your breeding and obvious abilities. What the little people think of as morality is no more than feelings of childhood guilt. The superior man makes his own morality.’

‘As does the superior woman.’

He bowed his head in assent. ‘I don’t believe in coincidences, but I do believe in destiny. You and I are destined to do great things together. Right now I am fully engaged in a project that is taking all my occult energy and all my spiritual will. But in a very short time I will be embarking on a new chapter in my life – the most important so far and I believe we can make that journey together.’

‘The only journey I’m planning to make tonight is to my flat in Earl’s Court.’

His face became grave. ‘London is a very dangerous place at the moment. Please believe me when I say you will be immeasurably safer for the moment at my estate in Ivinghoe. Please allow me the honour of offering you protection.’

‘What do you mean a dangerous place? Dangerous in what way?’

‘In my position I pick up a lot of inside information – I’m Leader of the House of Lords, you know. I gather the authorities in Whitehall are expecting some kind of serious trouble – I don’t know exactly what yet. But I do know Ivinghoe is infinitely safer than

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Earl's Court, and it's only an hour's drive from here. I would consider it a personal favour.'

Was this this step-by-step process of drawing her in part of a plan or was Buckingham genuinely as besotted by her as he seemed to be? Either way, his invitation got her further inside his world – or was it merely further down the rabbit hole?

'It sounds an easy favour to grant.'

They left the Society's headquarters, Buckingham locking the door with his ornate key, and got back into his car. As they were about to pull away there was a sharp rapping at the driver's window. Buckingham said, 'Excuse me for one moment. There's something I must attend to.'

Buckingham walked half a dozen paces away and stood in conversation with a tall, thin man with a beaky nose. He wore a leather jacket and an odd hat, a little like a forage cap. Sally got her powder compact and mirror out of her purse so she could watch them without being too obvious. He was one of the men from the Ford that had tailed them all evening. She made an effort to hear what they said but could hear only the tone of their voices – a sharp, angry exchange. Buckingham appeared to dismiss the tall thin man with an imperious wave of the hand and came back to the car.

'What was all that about?'

'One simply cannot get decent staff these days, for love nor money. You just have to take whoever you can get and crack the whip occasionally. Metaphorically speaking of course.'

They drove out of Bloomsbury Square, heading north. Buckingham lapsed into silence for a minute or two, and Sally couldn't tell whether he was upset by the row with the thin man or was simply thinking about what he wanted to say to her.

He glanced repeatedly in the rear view mirror. When he spoke, the sincerity in his low voice made the blood rush to her face and her throat dry. 'Do you know the real reason I asked you to come with me tonight?'

'Why did you?'

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‘You and I are alike. More alike than you realise. It’s the thing I asked you earlier on – the question you didn’t answer. We are both outsiders.’

Sally found herself back on the long drive along dusty African roads from Mombasa to Cairo. She would often pick up someone, man or woman, usually African, sometimes going to market, sometimes going home to their tribal village. They would talk for a few miles and then part with a farewell wave. That was what the whole of her life had been like. For 26 years she had been picking people up and saying goodbye to them because they were not like her. They were different – another tribe. The only exception had been Alain – tall, blonde, beautiful Alain.

Teddy Buckingham was right. They were the same tribe. They were male and female counterparts. He was audacious, free, open to adventure, bigger than ordinary people. He made her feel greater than herself, as though a whole new world were opening up in front of her – a world she had always felt was there but was somehow just out of reach. It was the world she drove thousands of miles across the African veldt to find, the world she jumped out of aircraft in the dark of night, behind enemy lines, to find. It was the adrenalin-fuelled euphoria she risked her life in search of. Now it was no longer out of reach but here, in front of her, and Teddy was holding out his hand, asking her to join him.

The moon was steadily rising as they drove north through the Chilterns. Shortly after midnight it hung just past its zenith, a Japanese lantern in the sky, throwing every hedgerow and tree into indigo and silver. At the estate’s perimeter, they arrived at a lodge house, its windows in darkness, and passed through five-barred gates into the long drive through parklands. A mile further on they arrived at the crest of a rise looking across and down a long valley, its landscape lit by the brilliance of the waxing moon. Buckingham pulled the car over at the crest so she could see the moonlit spectacle. Below them, set beside a long artificial lake and among landscaped parklands was the stunning Palladian mansion of Ivinghoe Abbey. He mused, ‘I love this vantage point – at night like

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this it always makes me think of Tennyson. “And on a sudden, Lo! The lake, and the long glories of the winter moon”.’

Sally stared hypnotised at the magnificent spectacle displayed by nature solely for their enjoyment at this unique moment, a piece of landscape theatre designed by architects and gardeners two hundred years before, still with the power to spellbind. Yet all this landscape, this beauty, was the personal property of the man sitting beside her. Was it wise to allow a man, so privileged, who owned so much, to think he could add her to his collection of beautiful things? What would happen if she refused him?

They drove down into the valley and pulled up over the gravel drive to the front of the great house. Off to the right were some dim lights, probably from stables or garages, where the station wagon that had followed them, drew up and two figures got out. As she opened the door of the Hispano–Suiza, she could hear their voices, too low and too far away to make out anything they said. She could see them silhouetted against the external garden lights: one shorter and slightly bandy-legged, like a cavalryman, the other tall, thin with a cap rammed down over his ears.

She disliked being dogged by these creatures and found Buckingham’s throw-away explanation of them too slick and shallow. She said, ‘You still haven’t really explained who these creepy people are. You say they’re bodyguards or security or what-have-you. But against what exactly?’

‘Did you know someone tried to kill me recently?’

‘I’m sorry. I had no idea. I’d heard nothing about it at all.’

‘You won’t. They hushed it all up. It’s bad for public morale if it gets around that people are trying to assassinate members of the royal family.’

‘Who was it who attacked you?’

‘Just some job with a service revolver and a grudge against the world. The trouble with being in the public eye is you become a target for every crackpot and crank. People look at you and see themselves, or whoever it is they hate.’

‘What happened to him?’

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‘I think they got a couple of doctors to certify him as insane and had him quietly locked away in Broadmoor. I don’t like being followed around any more than you do but I’m afraid it’s part of the price of being in the public eye.’

The house itself was in darkness apart from a lantern in the portico over the great front doors and chandeliers in the hall inside. The door opened as they got out and a pink-cheeked butler, stately like his house, emerged to greet them. He spoke to Buckingham, saying, ‘The Dowager Duchess has retired for the night, sir. Is there anything else you require tonight before the servants go to bed?’

‘Nothing more, thank you, Woodruff. Miss Honeychurch and I will have a nightcap in the library. She will sleep in the Alexandra Room tonight.’

He led her through the great doors into a high-ceilinged marble entrance hall, dominated by a circular granite table on which stood a bronze urn with the figure of Bellerophon riding his winged horse, Pegasus. Double doors off to the right led into a long library with a drinks table standing discreetly to one side. On it stood already a silver ice-bucket in which was cooling a bottle of Veuve Clicquot.

‘I find a little fizz helps me sleep at night – care to join me in a glass?’

‘That would be lovely, thank you.’

He poured the champagne, handed her a glass and lifted his in salutation.

Sally assumed this intoxicating touch was the last stage of a well-practised seduction technique and waited to resist his irresistible technique. To her surprise he drained his glass, stretched his arms and said, ‘I’ve had a long day – I hope you don’t mind if I turn in? But let me show you to your room.’

He led her up the wide curving staircase to the landing, her feet sinking into the burgundy carpet, and up the right hand branch to the west wing. They halted at a pair of polished mahogany doors that stretched from floor to moulded ceiling, furnished with ornate gilt locks and hinges. He unlocked the door, opened one of them for her and handed her the key. ‘I hope you enjoy sleeping here – it’s

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the finest of the guest bed chambers. It's called the Alexandra Room – my grandmother slept here many times when she was Queen. It is a royal bedchamber you see. You'll find Woodruff has laid out some night things for you.'

Sally had spent all evening waiting for Buckingham to seduce her, or even try to rape her. Now he merely kissed her hand and said again, with deep sincerity in his voice, 'I told you. I am and always will be, a gentleman.'

She said goodnight and stood watching his back disappear into the east wing of the great house. Was he really leaving her just like that? After all the warnings and the gossip? It was an intense relief no longer having to make any pretence. But she couldn't ignore a lingering sense of unfinished business.

She entered the Alexandra Room and was captivated immediately by its grandeur. Like the other rooms it was on a regal scale. Three large picture windows rose gracefully from ceiling to floor, draped with burgundy silk curtains. The parquet floor was covered with silken Afghan rugs and the room was designed around a beautiful walnut full tester bed, valanced from ceiling to floor in purple and gold brocades.

She placed the key Buckingham had given her into the lock but didn't turn it. An instinct told her she would spend the night undisturbed in this magnificent chamber.

A Victorian nightdress lay on the counterpane and she picked it up, wondering at the fineness of the silk and the coolness of its touch on her fingertips, trying to imagine who had previously worn such a fine garment, a duchess, perhaps. Or a princess. Or a Queen. She switched off the bedside light but felt far too awake even think about going to bed.

She crossed to one of the windows and threw the burgundy silk curtains wide. Despite their weight they ran easily on wooden rings along mahogany curtain poles to reveal a stunning nightscape outside in the grounds.

Below her window was the knot garden. Beyond that the formal gardens of lawns, copses and the silver lake landscaped in the 1760s by Capability Brown for the fifth duke. Beyond the

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gardens were the escarpments of the Chiltern Hills, capped by beech hangers silhouetted against the night. Above her the indigo canopy of the sky was cloudless and dominated by the waxing moon, more than half full already, lighting the world before her like a stage – a stage empty of actors and with a script not yet composed. ‘The Future Is Yet To Be Written’, the gilt inscription had said.

Her fingers struggled for a few moments with an ancient brass thumbwheel, some patent Victorian invention, that released the window catch and allowed her to swing the casement open a few inches on its brass stay. As she did so a deliciously cool breeze flooded in – a leafy zephyr that had stirred the beechwoods somewhere in the hills above, spilled down the grassy escarpment, slipped through the window and played over her face and bare arms. It linked her with the moonlit landscape surrounding the house. She longed to undress, to be free of her evening frock and feel the blessed coolness on the whole of her body. Yet an instinct told her she was still a soldier on duty and Coco Chanel was her uniform, her battledress.

She didn’t feel fear or anxiety. She was calmer than she had been for years – since before the war. She felt she could, if she wished, write her own story on this virginal moonscape. And unbidden, unwanted, unlooked-for, the thought spoke itself in her mind; All this could be mine. I could own this beautiful world and everything in it.

She had set out to seduce Teddy Buckingham, to get under his guard, under his skin, and to make him desire her. Instead, she had seduced herself.

Thirty One

She woke with a start to find she had fallen asleep fully clothed, sitting in an armchair beside the window. Dull morning sunshine slanted through the tall windows and onto the smooth embroidered counterpane of the bed. She looked at her watch and found it was past eight, and she became aware the house was already up and about. She could hear faint noises from several directions. One sounded like the dint of pots and pans being washed up from far-off kitchens, another the low hum of a car engine turning over from the rear of the house, as though someone were tuning up a powerful engine. Her Alvis, perhaps?

She opened the bedroom door and emerged cautiously onto the upper landing, not knowing what to expect or what was expected of her. There was no-one around. She walked down the wide staircase. The grand hall below was empty but, as she reached the last step and hesitated about what to do next, a tall woman emerged from the entrance to the dining room. She was in her sixties, erect and straight as a ballet mistress, her silver-white hair pulled severely back, her face pale. She was dressed in a sage green cashmere twinset and tweed skirt, a Jack Russell terrier trotting at her heels. She approached Sally and extended her hand.

‘I’m afraid that boy of mine is quite incorrigible. As usual he’s completely forgotten his duty to his guests and gone off riding somewhere or other. No doubt he’ll show up when he’s ready. It’s Sally, I believe, isn’t it?’

Sally took the offered hand. Without it having consciously registered, she had seen Clarissa, Dowager Lady Buckingham before, in magazines and newsreels. She recalled seeing photos of

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her inspecting Queen Alexandra's Royal Army Nursing Corps as their Colonel. There was one famous photograph on the cover of some magazine – *Picture Post* or *Everybody's* – of the tall woman with the very sincere smile, inspecting the nurses and talking to one of the youngsters on parade in what seemed an intimate and private moment of sympathy on a very public occasion.

‘Yes, ma’am. Sally Honeychurch.’

‘Honeychurch? Are you by any chance related to the travel writer?’

‘She’s my mother.’

‘Oh what a lovely coincidence. I met your mother once – in Singapore before the war, years ago. We stayed at the Raffles Hotel and dined together. A charming woman. I’ve bought all her books since then. Then I suppose you must be the “little Sally” she wrote about, who was always getting into scrapes?’

‘I’m afraid so. It doesn’t happen quite so often these days, though.’

The Duchess looked at the little black dress and high heels that Sally still wore at breakfast-time, and smiled ironically. ‘I see that dreadful son of mine has lured you away from some dinner party, quite thoughtlessly as usual. My mother used to advise us never to accept invitations after dinner or after tennis – it’s always so embarrassing catching a cab home in the morning in the wrong clothes. I’m sure I have a jumper and slacks that will fit – we are about the same size aren’t we? Come up to my room and we’ll see.’

Sally followed her upstairs to the upper landing, the terrier trotting behind them. Clarissa paused at the picture window at the head of the stairs and pointed proudly to the magnificent sweep of the Ivinghoe Hills stretching for miles as far as Ivinghoe Beacon. ‘I never tire of it. I always stop here and think how lucky we are to be such a part of nature.’

The Duchess’s bedchamber was in the other wing of the house and was the mirror image of the one she had slept in. Clarissa opened one of two wardrobes. She seemed to be less familiar with its contents and Sally guessed it contained clothes she wore infrequently, if at all, but could not yet bear to part with. She said,

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‘Try these,’ and handed her a pair of black slacks. ‘I know they are all the rage in London, but I’m afraid I’m too old now to change the habits of a lifetime.’ Sally could see they had not been worn.

‘And I think this will go with your lovely blonde hair’, handing her a cream long-sleeved jumper. For one moment, they stood facing each other, Clarissa looking Sally over as though she were a couturier’s dress model, Sally wondering, is she expecting me to undress now, in front of her?

Clarissa closed the wardrobe door and said, ‘Just leave your dress on the bed in your room – I’ll have Woodruff sponge and press it for you. I really don’t know where Teddy has got to. I’m afraid he’s one for always getting into one scrape or another.’ She turned and smiled brightly. ‘But then, if the books are to be believed, so are you – or at any rate you used to be! Perhaps you’re two of a kind?’

‘When you’ve changed, please feel free to have a look around the house – I’ve endless chores to attend to. This house is so demanding. You’ll find breakfast in the dining room.’

Sally changed in her room. Once again the warnings she had been given had turned out unexpectedly. Vera had been emphatic, ‘The dowager Duchess is still very much the power behind the throne. You mustn’t trust her one inch.’ Yet the friendly woman who had generously lent her fresh clothes and graciously given her the freedom of her grand house, hardly seemed the type to put strychnine in anyone’s drink.

Sally went down to the dining room and found rows of silver chafing dishes lined up on a massive mahogany sideboard and discovered how ravenous she was. She helped herself to a mound of bacon and scrambled egg and found a place at the vast polished dining table. Just as she sat down to attack it, the butler, Woodruff, appeared as though by magic at her elbow and asked, ‘Shall I pour some tea, miss?’

‘Some coffee would be lovely, thank you.’

Woodruff said, ‘I’ll see what cook can manage, miss.’ He spoke the word ‘manage’ to convey the meaning ‘There is still rationing, you know.’ It was comforting to know even the

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aristocracy was suffering the same shortages as other people, that austerity was everywhere.

Breakfast finished, she turned her attention to exploring as Clarissa Buckingham had suggested. Her first concern was the Alvis. Could the engine noises she'd heard first thing be from her own car? She left via the heavy, studded front door and turned left across the front of the house, admiring as she walked the Palladian architecture with its Graeco-Roman columns and its symmetry.

Beyond the house itself she found a high arched wall that seemed to curtain off the kitchen garden and stables and she walked through the open archway. Behind the high wall was a cobbled courtyard surrounded by stable doors. Many were closed up and appeared to be no longer in use. On her right, a few were open with fresh straw spread on the ground. A well-groomed chestnut mare looked over one of the stable doors and eyed her hopefully. The first stable was in use as a tack room with harness, saddles and blankets hung on walls or propped on benches. A balding older man in dark leather apron and protective sleeves was soaping a saddle on a wooden horse placed in the doorway to catch the sun. A young lad was assisting him. Behind them, lined up on the stable wall, leather harness and a row of dressage whips gleamed in the sun.

'Good morning. Can you tell me where the Duke is?' She asked.

The old man stopped scrubbing, straightened up. 'Mister Teddy's gone riding, miss. He's expected back later this morning.'

'I see. I'm also looking for my car – I believe you have some garages here?'

He pointed to a second wall with a second arch beyond the stables, this one with a pair of faded blue painted doors firmly closed. 'Cars are all kept through there, miss. You'll have to ask the new people.'

'The new people?'

'Mister Teddy's friends from London.' He said this with some disdain and returned to his saddle.

She tried the blue doors and found them barred, but within the right hand door was a postern gate. She tried the handle and

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found it was unlocked. She stepped through and found herself in a second cobbled stable-yard but here the stables had been converted to garages, most with their doors closed. Above the garages were flats that once housed many servants for house and garden before the war, their windows now grimy and untended in the post-war egalitarian world where servants were far less numerous than in the heyday of country-house weekends.

In the middle of the yard stood her Alvis and next to it an ex-army three-ton Bedford lorry with the bonnet raised and engine running. Hanging over it, spanner in hand, was a sallow-faced man in his forties, with a very short crew cut and wearing an old combat jacket, oil-stained and dirty.

Sally walked over and greeted him with a friendly smile. She stood admiring the vehicle. 'It's a Bedford QLR, isn't it? I drove one of these in the war. They go on for ever, don't they?'

The man sprang to attention and seemed unsure what to do or say. 'Are you having trouble with the timing? They're notorious for slipping out of sync.'

One of the stable doors opened and a thickset man appeared in the yard. It was the bandy-legged man she had glimpsed the previous night. He walked smartly to the lorry and tapped the crew cut mechanic on the back. The mechanic at once turned and marched back to the stable without a word, as though having been given a silent command.

The thickset man was dressed in the worst possible taste. He wore the check cheesecutter cap a Newbury trainer might wear, had a bright red paisley cravat at his throat, and jodphurs. He looked like a second-hand car salesman who had dressed in imitation of a photograph from *Country Life*.

He smiled without any warmth. 'You must excuse Johnny – he hasn't the ability to speak, you know.'

His English was flawless but only in the way a foreigner would speak it. His accent was a curious mix of the pedantic aristocrat and the illiterate workman.

'I really came round to collect my car – the Alvis.'

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‘His Royal Highness gave instructions for your vehicle to be cleaned, miss.’

She walked to the Alvis, taking care to walk round behind the lorry and glance in the back as she passed. It was empty now but could easily transport eight to ten men. It wasn’t capable of transporting a five to ten ton load. She found her own car spotless and gleaming. Even the tires and hubcaps had been restored to showroom condition. Someone has spent considerable time with a chamois leather and bucket of water to get it to such as pristine state. She tried the door but it was locked.

She turned back to cravat man. ‘Where are the keys?’

As she turned, she became aware that, above the stable opposite, a figure had appeared at one of the grimy windows and was observing the yard below. The flats were not all unoccupied after all. It was the tall, thin man with the odd cap. He stood erect, with his hands clasped behind his back and, bizarrely, wore sun glasses on his beaky nose. In the garage beneath was the Ford station wagon.

Cravat man followed her gaze, flicked a nervous glance up at the window, then stared evasively at the lorry and replied, ‘My apologies, miss. I know not where the keys are. I think the Duke must still have them.’

‘And where is the Duke?’

‘I’m sorry, miss. I am only the minder of the machines. I know not where the Duke may be.’

Sally thanked him and walked back to the house. She walked as casually as possible, conscious she was still under observation from at least two pairs of eyes but mentally congratulating herself. There were at least three anonymous figures billeted in the old stable yard flats but intuition told her there were more. Stored neatly in the corner of the yard were half a dozen milk bottles, waiting to be collected. She estimated five men but counted it as six to be on the safe side. From what the old stable hand had said, they were the ‘new people’ from London. Military bearing. Orderly behaviour. A chain of command with the tall thin man giving the orders. Imperfect English. She was sure she had found the men who

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attacked the bonded warehouse at Hays Wharf. At the same time there was no sign of any vehicle or equipment that could house a five to ten ton weapon. Just as she was sure she had found the men she was looking for, she equally felt the weapon was not at Ivinghoe Abbey but cached elsewhere. She had not found her quarry, but had picked up its trail. She was getting somewhere at last.

She returned to the main entrance of the house and walked casually to the wooden shelf beside the staircase where she had noted the telephone was kept. She quietly picked it up but found it was completely dead. It had been disconnected from the public network. That channel was denied her. She'd have to find another way.

She walked back into the hall and entered the library, an immensely long room lit by a series of chandeliers. She wandered past the bookshelves, seeking some clue as to the character of their owner. Many of the books lined up had been undisturbed for decades except for occasional dusting. Shiny brown calf and red leather labels gleamed from volumes neatly arranged by height, rather than subject. They were leather-bound volumes from the eighteenth and nineteenth century – the 'library of a gentleman', probably bought by the yard from whichever bookseller was most fashionable in the London of two centuries before. These volumes told her nothing about the present Duke of Buckingham, only that his ancestors wished to be thought cultured and literate.

At the far end of the library, near the high, latticed Gothic windows, the walls were lined with shelves of more recent books, colourful dust jackets and cloth bindings instead of calf leather and gilt. Here, she felt she was more likely to discover something of the tastes of the current generation. She found works by an eclectic array of authors including H.G Wells, George Bernard Shaw, D.H. Lawrence and George Orwell. The books here were arranged more or less alphabetically by author and out of curiosity she looked for Ma's name.

She found four volumes, including a well-thumbed copy of *Far Eastern Adventures*. She picked up the book, opened it and on the title page found the inscription, 'To Clarissa Buckingham, a

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most engaging dinner companion. Best wishes and Regards, Nancy Honeychurch.’ It was Ma’s handwriting all right. Any doubts Sally had entertained about the Duchess’s story of having met Ma abroad were swept away by those two lines of fading ink from before the war.

On the other side of the library she noticed a concealed *trompe l’oeil* door that had been faced with dummy book spines, designed to blend in unnoticed with the real volumes either side – an architectural device she had seen before. There was no handle on the door and she guessed it worked on a spring latch, probably just by pushing it. But the door remained closed at her touch so must be locked. She ran her fingertips over the fake book spines and found the keyhole was cleverly disguised as the publisher’s insignia at the base of the spine of one of the books.

She glanced around to make sure she was still alone in the library before taking a couple of kirby grips from her hair and using them to tease open the much worn lock. The deadbolt flipped with a soft click back and she felt a slight outward movement of the door on its spring. She pressed near the right hand edge and the door swung open inwards, revealing a dark cave-like space. She groped on the wall inside the door for a light switch, went inside when the lights came on and closed the door behind her.

The concealed room was arranged like a study with a leather-topped desk and filing cabinets. It was more like a museum, or even a shrine. Over the desk, on walls and bookcases were Nazi photographs, flags, emblems and paraphernalia. Over the desk was a battle ensign of the Kriegsmarine. On the desk, a Mauser pistol in a presentation case lined with purple velvet.

In pride of place were three photographs in silver frames of Teddy, competing in the fencing events at the 1936 Berlin Olympics. The final picture was of him on the podium receiving a medal from the Fuhrer, beside it, the medal itself in a glass case. On the desk was a photo of Adolf Hitler – the famous Heinrich Hoffman portrait from the cover of *Mein Kampf*. At the bottom, in German, were a few words in ink, ‘For a greater understanding

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between our two countries.’ It was signed, ‘To Lord Buckingham, A. Hitler.’

Anger rose in her craw. Here at last was the truth. All the rest had been lies. As she reached for the photograph of Hitler, the concealed door behind her made a soft click. Sally froze. From the corner of her eye, a dark shadow like a wolf took shape. When she turned, she found the dark shape was Teddy standing in the doorway, riding whip in hand.

Thirty Two

‘What do you think of my little collection? I usually keep it locked away from prying eyes – I find people are apt to leap to the wrong conclusions.’

She held up the photo of Hitler. ‘I take it you mean you don’t want them to know you are a Nazi?’

He laughed in genuine surprise. ‘Oh my God. I may be many things but I’m certainly not a Nazi.’

He gently took the photo of Hitler from Sally’s hand and looked at it. ‘I must admit to being arrogant and very vain when I was younger and I was flattered when corporal Hitler gave me this, but it’s not the Nazis I admire – it’s the German people – the most highly cultured and sophisticated nation in Europe. I thought you and I felt the same way about that? I love the music of Wagner, Mozart, Beethoven. I love the poetry of Goethe and Schiller, the writing of Hegel and Nietzsche. The Nazis were merely the result of a historical accident. If there had not been a Wall Street crash in 1929, no hyperinflation in the Weimar Republic, you would never even have heard of the Nazis. But there would still have been a Germany and you would most certainly have heard from them.’

Sally pointed to the walls, to the red and black swastika flags, to the photos. ‘Then why the museum? Why are you keeping all this?’

‘This stuff was given to me by my German friends before the war – most of them now dead. They were patriots who wasted their lives in the most futile conflict in history. It hurts me so much when I think I spent some of the best years of my life in Germany – at the Olympics, driving the Nurburgring, skiing in the Alps.’

‘A pretty odd way to remember your friends, isn’t it?’

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He glared at her. ‘Is it? Didn’t you lose anyone in the war? Do you forget your friends so easily? I don’t want to forget mine.’

‘I’m sorry. Of course I . . .’

Teddy carefully replaced the photo of Hitler on the desk and spoke softly. ‘Look, I should be angry with you for snooping around my things, but I do understand your confusion. I’ve been wanting to have a real heart to heart with you – it’s just that I’ve had so many urgent matters demanding my attention at the moment. Come for a walk with me now, up Ivinghoe Beacon. The countryside is lovely, and we can talk alone, just you and me.’

‘I’m hardly dressed for country walks.’

‘Oh never mind that. We’ll find you some walking shoes and a coat in the flower room.’

‘By the way, I went round to get my Alvis and they told me you had the keys.’

‘I’m sorry – I’ll chase up Johnny. He’s supposed to leave all car keys in the bronze urn on the hall table – the big round granite job. You should find them there if you look.’

‘While I was looking for my car I saw that tall man who follows us around. The one with the odd hat. Who is he exactly? He gives me the creeps.’

‘Herr Berlin? He’s just my security adviser. He’s one of the good Germans – the ones who helped us during the war. I wouldn’t worry about him. He looks a bit queer but he’s quite harmless – and he’s really been extremely useful to me. If you meet him you’ll realise he’s not as bad as he seems. Come on, let’s have that walk.’

She followed him through the house, through the dining room, past the green baize door, along cream-painted corridors past the butler’s pantry to the kitchen, where cook was calling instructions to two young girls washing up the breakfast things. Beyond was the scullery, where Woodruff sat at a pine table, wearing a green apron and protective sleeves, polishing shoes. He got to his feet, but Teddy motioned him back into his chair. They carried on to the still room and into the flower room at the very back of the house.

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One complete wall was taken up by three large Belfast sinks; between them grooved wooden draining boards were stacked with a forest of newly-washed glass vases and jugs. A skinny teenage girl was laboriously wiping out the flower vases with newspaper. Teddy dismissed her with a smile. She blushed, curtseyed and disappeared as they came in. Along the opposite wall was a rack of raincoats and overcoats – some ancient and tatty – and under the long wooden bench seat, a row of wellingtons and walking boots and shoes.

‘I’m sure we can find you something that will fit. What shoe size are you?’

Sally admitted to seven. Teddy handed her a pair of solid-looking walking boots with socks tucked inside. ‘These are mother’s – she’s a seven too. I’m sure she won’t mind.’ They also took light raincoats from the rack and set off.

They strolled through the formal gardens, still in flower in September with the purple of buddleia and hydrangeas, and the yellow of Michaelmas daisies, and sunflowers. They walked past the lake, through a mature arboretum, with the first fall of rusty orange leaves, crossed a mossy wooden stile and started up the grass foot slopes of Ivinghoe Beacon.

The weather was clement with white clouds sailing rapidly across a sapphire sky propelled by high altitude winds they could barely feel on the muddy fields and footpaths where they walked. It was pleasantly warm, so they carried their raincoats slung over their shoulders.

‘What’s this “heart to heart” you want to have?’ And just how are you going to explain away a secret room full of Nazi memorabilia?’

He was silent for some time as they walked s though seeking a place to start. She let him be and simply drank in the scents and colours that surrounded them and attracted myriad bees and butterflies flying in all directions.

When he finally spoke it was to surprise her again. ‘Do you know what I did in the war?’

‘I’ve no idea. What did you do? Write letters to *The Times*?’

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‘As a matter of fact I drove an ambulance in North Africa. I wanted to join the armed services, but the War Office wouldn’t let me because of my political background. So I volunteered for the Red Cross. We picked up battle-field casualties and ferried them back to dressing stations and field hospitals. They were all sorts – British, French, Italians, German. We didn’t make any distinction. We just tried our best to save lives. We had almost two thousand wounded under canvas at Sidi Barani. The Royal Army Medical Corps commanding officer decided this large tented encampment might attract enemy attention so he ordered it to be camouflaged with tank netting. Next day, a couple of dozen Italian bombers found the camp, saw the camouflage, assumed it was a tank force and unloaded their bombs on it – completely destroyed the whole thing in a matter of minutes. We managed to get a dozen or so wounded into a couple of ambulances and jeeps and on the road out of there.’

‘I’m terribly sorry. I had no idea you’d seen active service. I just assumed . . .’

He scarcely seemed to notice. ‘I’ve often asked myself was anyone to blame for Sidi Barani? Was it our fault for concentrating so many wounded in one place? Was it the CO’s fault for demanding camouflage? Was it the Italian Air Force’s fault for dropping bombs on a Red Cross position? Or was it nobody’s fault? Just an accident of war? Then I started thinking, how many accidents of war does it take before you take real action aimed at ending it for good and all?’

‘What’s that got to do with your collection of swastikas?’

He grinned. ‘Just this. I learned some valuable lessons from the Nazis.’

‘What lessons exactly?’

‘The first thing I learned is that to gain political power – real power, not the feeble grasp of Comrade Attlee – you need useful idiots to work for you. Second, if you have the moral courage to do what you know to be the right thing for the nation, then you can accomplish anything. That’s what Leni Riefenstahl really meant by *The Triumph of the Will*.’

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‘You’re talking as though you mean to rule the country yourself.’

‘Is that such a far-fetched idea? This country has lost its way because it has fallen into the hands of fools and knaves. Even the most ardent socialist like George Orwell agrees with that. He said England is like a family with the wrong people in charge. So-called democracy simply means the same political hacks being returned again and again. And where is the true working man and working woman in all this? I’ll tell you. Nowhere. Did you know that before the war, in the 1935 general election, 72 per cent of Labour MPs came from a working class background. But in this election we’ve just had – supposed to be a Labour landslide and a victory for the people, mind you – do you know how many of the MPs elected were working class? It was down to 38 per cent – the old elite were firmly back in control and real democracy was replaced by the sham democracy we have now – shamocracy, I call it. And where do women figure in all this? Again, nowhere. There are now precisely twenty four women MPs out of a total of six hundred and forty in the House of Commons. It was all right for women to risk their necks in the war, but now the war’s over there are suddenly no jobs for women where it counts.’

Are you playing with me, your lordship? Have I slipped up already somewhere along the line? Aloud she said, ‘I can’t argue with you there. All the women I knew in the services were out on their ear the day the war ended – including me.’ To lighten the moment she added, ‘If I didn’t know better I’d say you’re starting to sound like Virginia Woolf.’

‘As a matter of fact I think Virginia speaks a lot of sense. I don’t agree with everything she says, but why should half the nation’s creative and intellectual capital be squandered, just to keep some old codgers in Whitehall happy?’

‘And how exactly are you going to remedy that injustice?’

‘For a start, how about a National University, in which anyone can enrol, with lectures delivered over the wireless?’

‘You’ve really thought about this, haven’t you?’

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He paused and turned, taking her elbow and urging her to turn and look. They had reached perhaps a thousand feet but because of the lie of the land they might almost have been taking off in an aircraft – the view was of nature at its most beautiful and most enthralling.

‘I’ve done more than just think about it. I’m trying to do something about it.’

‘Do what about it?’

‘That mess I told you about in Sidi Barani? When the Italian air force bombed a Red Cross site by mistake? If you think that was a tragedy, do you know how many innocent French civilians were killed in the RAF bombing campaign to liberate France? I’ll tell you – they accidentally killed 68,000 French men, women and children. 68,000! Wouldn’t it have been better to carry out one raid, kill ten thousand and end the war? Imagine for one moment there was a button here in front of you that you could push and would avoid 90 per cent of those deaths. Wouldn’t you want to push it?’

‘It would depend on what exactly happens when I push the button. People sometimes think they can control events when, in reality, all they can do is affect them.’

‘What did you do in the war, Sally? Did you wear a uniform? Did you risk your neck?’

She felt her pulse rising. ‘We all risked our necks. I seem to remember people were trying to kill us.’

‘But what thanks did you get afterwards? A “thank you” letter from the government, and that was it? Women were in the thick of it, manning ack ack guns, air raid wardens, even delivering aircraft to aerodromes. Where are they now? Where are you now? I’ll bet you’ve kept your ATS uniform – still got it hanging in the wardrobe? I’m right aren’t I? Well look after it, because that’s all the thanks you’re going to get from this government – or the one before that – the so-called “National” government that mismanaged the war.’

‘Mismanaged? I thought we won.’

‘Did we? Win? What exactly have we won? Thanks to that warmonger-in-chief Churchill we’ve got a million dead, the country

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is bankrupt, going cap in hand to Washington. And we've now got the commissars of the Labour Party in charge, taking their orders from Moscow and wrecking the economy with mad ideas of nationalisation.

'You as a woman should see that you and all your sex were used to defend a bankrupt system, and a corrupt house of commons and now you're no longer needed, you've been dropped like hot bricks.'

Have you been spying on me? Have your German pals dug up something I've overlooked? But he wasn't talking about her – he was simply describing the situation of all women.

'Why do you settle for this second class role society has assigned you as a woman? You are more intelligent and more capable than most of the people out there and you know it. You've always known it. It's in your heredity. You have Norse blood like me. We're two of a kind. We weren't born to be told what to do by the frightened hordes of little men in their little offices. We were born to do as we will. What we know to be right.

'It makes my blood boil when I think of those fools sitting in that talking shop at Westminster braying and bleating and taking decisions that affect the lives of millions'.

'They were elected'. She protested.

'Yes, elected by fools who are led by the nose – useful idiots was how Lenin described them. They are told how to vote by press barons who are the most gutless people in Britain.'

He lapsed into silence as though aware he was monopolising the conversation and going too far, too soon. What is it he isn't saying?

As they neared the top of the hill and the gradient eased off, the trail worn in the grass by many walkers became narrower and a little slippery. Teddy went first to show her the best places to plant her steps and put out a protective hand to steady her waist as she stumbled briefly. Once again she felt the unusual heat of his hand on her body.

They reached the very top of the hill and found themselves quite alone. Later in the day there would be keen courting couples

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and young families conquering the Beacon and looking out as they looked now over thousands of acres of Chiltern countryside. But for now, the conquest was theirs alone to enjoy alone.

On the very brow, someone had erected a stone monument with a trigonometry point and a bronze plate telling visitors the hill had been one of the chain of beacons that alerted the Queen's Navy to the presence of the Spanish Armada off English shores, hence its name. News of danger could be relayed to London in less than 30 minutes in the sixteenth century. The irony wasn't lost on her. Today there was no means of communication at all.

They stood silent for several moments, just taking in the sweep of the countryside around them on all sides, to the horizon. The sense of urgency that had compelled her to put her life in danger was slowly being eroded by the simple and eternal beauty of the countryside, remote from petty human concerns. This landscape that surrounded them now would have appeared much the same ten thousand years ago to their Mesolithic ancestors. Her epiphany looking out at the moonscape of the hills and the connection she had felt to the land was there again today, if anything even more deeply – perhaps more deeply than she had ever really felt anything before.

As though reading her mind, Teddy said, 'I love coming up here because it makes me feel part of the land, part of all this beauty and part of nature itself. I feel like one of those trees or one of the hills – does that sound crazy?'

'You're not crazy at all. I feel it too. I felt it even more strongly last night when I looked out on the hills lit by moonlight.'

'Let's at least be comfortable.' He spread his ancient mackintosh on the grass and invited her to sit. Sally lay back beside him on her elbows. Somehow it seemed a very natural thing to do, like a family picnic.

'You do realise everything you can see down there, all 8,000 acres, belongs to the estate? Belongs to me, in fact. It's a great responsibility owning such beauty.'

'Does owning so much bring you pleasure? There are millions of people who have nothing.'

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‘It belongs to me in name only. I’m just a caretaker. You can’t really own land or rivers or trees. If an accident of birth hands you a title deed, all you can hope to do is be a good steward while you last and try to pass on what you’ve inherited.

‘When I think about it, it beggars belief that the whole of England has fallen into the hands of petty-minded jack-in-office do-gooders. People who, in the name of some social engineering experiment, are planning to plunge this country into division and despair. When all the time there is a whole class of people who have been born and bred and raised to proper stewardship for a thousand years or more; taught to manage wisely and well in the interests of everyone – not just a narrow section of society. England hasn’t done too badly considering we hold the greatest empire the world has ever known. It wasn’t the Attlees and the Bevins who built that empire, however good their intentions. It wasn’t even the Churchills, for all their valour and courage. It was men like my father and his father.’

He caught himself ranting again and laughed in a self-deprecating way. ‘Sorry. I didn’t mean to preach at you so early in our relationship.’

‘Do we have a relationship?’

‘That rather depends on you, Sally. I already know I’ve found my psychic twin. Only you can say if you feel the same.’

‘And if I don’t? Feel the same?’

‘Then it’s like the poet said; “To love, to live, to take what fate or the gods may give. To have, to hold – and in time let go.” It’s like the land here. Nothing is forever. We just make the best of things and enjoy life while we can.’

Sally looked more closely into his eyes. There was no doubting his sincerity, or his passion for the land. Other men, men like Alain and Peter Stanhope, were audacious. You my lord are something I didn’t even know existed. Aloud she said, ‘I don’t think I quite got that poem until now.’

It felt the most natural thing in the world when he leaned over and kissed her as she lay on the grass. She wanted more than anything to let go completely, to be rid of all the responsibility and the duty and the fear of what might happen if she alone failed to stop

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the terrorists. But even though her head told her to remain watchful, alert, keyed up, her body wilfully ignored the order and dissolved into the heat of Buckingham's muscular body, and his desire for her.

They continued to sit and hold hands like children, melting into the landscape as though in a mutual dream. The high winds were still propelling cotton wool clouds across the blindingly blue morning sky, painting the landscape below with their moving shadows like a gigantic magic lantern show, put on for them alone.

Teddy spoke first. 'Don't you believe me? That we are male and female of the same person?'

'You are a member of the Royal Family. I'm only a commoner.'

He laughed. 'Royal blood is in your veins – I can prove it to you. Come on back down to the house, I've got something to show you.'

They got up and began to make their way carefully back down the pathway.

When they arrived back at the house and entered the great hall, Teddy walked to the circular granite table and fished around in the bronze urn. He produced the keys of the Alvis, held them up high as though to prove a point, then handed them to her.

'Here's your keys. Johnny had put them here just as I said.' His face became grave. 'Unfortunately I'm afraid we're in an emergency security situation here at the Abbey today, so all the estate gates are temporarily closed and the guards have instructions not to let anyone in or out for the time being.'

'What's the emergency?'

'I don't want you to worry about my personal protection problems. You remember I said I use bodyguards because some cretins in the great British public think it would be fun to take pot shots at me? Well, another one of them tried to get into the grounds this morning – with an automatic rifle or some such. The bobbies have been called in from Aylesbury and he'll be handed over to them after they've done with him. But they've advised us to keep the gates closed in case he has a friend.'

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Sally took the keys, smiling, as her mind whirled with questions.

‘Who is this character? Some kind of detective?’

‘No idea. I leave all that to the staff.’

She pocketed the keys, saying brightly, ‘Thanks for these.’ She couldn’t risk asking any more questions but her guts tightened as the faces of Danny Jacobs and Mac Mackenzie swam into her imagination.

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Thirty Three

Teddy led her across the stone flags of the entrance hall, to the right of the great staircase where a section of panelling ran from the foot of the stairs to the rear entrance of the library. Here were displayed three eighteenth century portraits. Two smaller paintings were of men in high collars and fine robes. Between them was a larger portrait of a seated woman in her twenties, dressed in a voluminous emerald green silk gown and wearing a large hat decorated with an ostrich feather.

Teddy stopped before the portrait and merely stood, watching Sally's face and smiling knowingly. It took her a few seconds to catch his meaning because of the unfamiliarity of the fashions. But when she got it, it was unmistakable. It was like looking at a photograph of herself.

'In the family we just call it "the Gainsborough portrait" – I often wonder whether women really wore hats like that or whether he kept a few handy in his studio and made them put them on while sitting.'

'Who is she?'

'My great, great, lots of times grandmother. She's Charlotte Hazlemere, Duchess of Buckingham. Painted in 1779. I fell in love with this painting when I was twelve years old, so you see I've known you for longer than you realise.'

As they continued to stand, staring at the portrait, Woodruff appeared at Teddy's elbow and whispered a few words in his ear. Teddy turned to her. 'I'm terribly sorry – I'm wanted urgently. There's some things I need to sort out. But don't go away. I'll be

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back in ten minutes.’

Sally waited as his footsteps echoed on the stone paving across the hall to the front door and then halt, as he spoke to whoever Woodruff had admitted on some urgent errand. Two voices spoke low but forcefully. It was obvious from the start that Teddy was having a row with someone and both men were struggling to keep their tempers in check.

By inching closer to the foot of the staircase and leaning back slightly, she was able to catch a glimpse without being seen. She could see the back of Teddy’s head and, opposite him, the tall German she had seen earlier in the garage, Herr Berlin. She tried to make out what they were arguing about but the voices were too indistinct and they were speaking in German.

She slipped quietly into the rear entrance to the library and looped around until she was closer to the open doorway to the hall where they were arguing. It was risky because if anyone saw her in the library they would know she was listening. She was just able to make out the man who Teddy had casually dismissed as his personal security guard. He was six feet tall, athletic and sinewy despite looking to be in his fifties or even older. His face was partly hidden by his oddly designed dark cap but his face was long and thin and his cheeks pinched and either side of a beaky nose. Sally was more than ever convinced the man was Franz Kammler.

He spoke flawless German with an educated accent, university rather than aristocratic, speaking in a clipped and demanding manner as though used to giving orders – and used to having his orders obeyed. Despite his rank he was deferential to Teddy – several times he used the formal address, ‘Herr Herzog’.

From the book table where she stood she could hear only half the conversation taking place in the hall. It sounded as though Teddy was pacing up and down and his words rose and fell as he moved. The stone hall also lent a disorienting echo to some of the words and not others. To hear every word clearly she would have to move to the side of the doorway – a vulnerable position for which there was no excuse other than eavesdropping. This is what I’m here for.

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As soon as she was in position she was able for the first time to get a good look at 'Herr Berlin'. She could now see the purpose of the cap was an attempt to disguise his disfigured ear. Most of the bottom half was missing completely and there was a scar in the hair behind it. At the same moment she grasped she was the subject of the discussion. 'Herr Berlin' was saying, '... frankly incredible you are wasting time and taking chances with our joint security at such a critical phase of the project. You know next to nothing about her. You've seen the dossier – nothing before a year ago. The war is a complete blank. She could be literally anybody. How can you even consider such – I must say it Herr Herzog – such foolhardiness when we are all so close and with so much at stake.'

A cold certainty gripped her heart. Until hearing these words the slim possibility had remained she was mistaken and Teddy Buckingham was what he seemed or just a naïve tool of someone else. She was now certain the tall German was Kammler and the project they were discussing in low tones in the hall of an English country house was the atomic destruction of central London.

Teddy said, 'Look, give me some credit, will you. I do know what I'm doing. Firstly, I know a great deal more about her than you and your people could ever discover, on a level you don't even understand. Secondly, you are talking about the woman I intend to marry, so please be careful what you say.'

Sally put the back of her hand to her mouth and felt her cheeks colouring. Teddy had as good as said as much to her on several occasions with his talk about being genetic twins and being of royal blood, but she had interpreted it as the words of a wildly impulsive and flamboyant personality. Now, it seemed, he was a lot more impulsive than she knew. This infatuation of his tilted the balance in her favour if she could find a way to use it.

'Herr Herzog, that is all beside the point. I don't care who you marry. The important thing is whether we can trust this woman, or whether we have got a spy in our midst.'

'Surely you can't think –'

'You must test her loyalty – today.'

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Sally sensed that Teddy was growing impatient and intended to bring the conversation to an end. If he did so and then walked into the library, he would discover her there, listening. She decided attack was the best form of defence and walked back through the library and reappeared in the lower corridor beside the staircase and the portraits. She walked casually towards them both in the hall, as though she had simply grown tired of waiting for him to return.

The instant the German caught sight of her he turned and walked away through the front door, touching his odd cap in what could have been some pastiche of a salute. Teddy beamed and walked towards her.

Annoyance, even arrogance seemed to be called for. ‘Who is that awful character? He looks at me as though I were a servant.’

‘I told you before he is just the security expert I’ve hired and he’s being an arse – taking his job far too seriously. Worrying over nothing. Please forget about him. Now, I have a huge favour to ask you.’

‘What favour is that?’

‘It seems I have to go into London after all today on an important errand. There’s some stuff I must collect and put in a safe place. My car’s rather conspicuous – would you drive me in and give me hand?’

Thirty Four

Sally glanced in the rear view mirror. The Ford station wagon was still shadowing them half a mile behind. When she slowed down to pass through villages, the gap narrowed and she could just make out the figure of Kammler in the passenger seat, his head almost touching the roof.

Beside her, Teddy stared out of the window. He'd hardly spoken since they'd started. She clicked on the car radio but could only find some Russian opera singer on the Home Service, half drowned out by static, and turned it off again.

The weather was becoming Autumnal and she turned on the heater, directing it at her feet. Still Teddy was preoccupied with the hedgerows and farms flashing past.

'I thought you told me London was a dangerous place at the moment – somewhere to be avoided, you said.'

'It's not dangerous when you're with me. It might get dangerous soon, though.'

'Dangerous how? Riots or something?'

'Let's just say there are some big changes coming in this country. I'm going to play an important role in those changes. You can play an important part in them too, if you want to.'

'Tell me what kind of changes and I'll tell you if I want to be part of it.'

'You're very blunt, aren't you? Unusually blunt for a woman.'

'I promised myself long ago I would never have my time wasted by fools. I just like to make sure, that's all.'

'I love your guts, Sally. You're nobody's fool. Let's get this morning's business over and talk about us later.'

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The ‘us’ sounded ominous and Buckingham was already taking a great deal for granted. But now was not the time to burst his ballooning illusions. She held her peace and kept driving. When they reached the East End of London, She said, as casually as she could manage, ‘Where exactly are we headed for?’

‘The Tower of London.’

‘The Tower?’

‘That’s right. I’m the hereditary Constable of the Tower – didn’t you know? My family have been keepers of the keys of England for three hundred years.’

He directed her to drive through the cramped streets to the ordinary working entrance off Tower Hill. Before the war, in summer, crowds of tourists jammed the narrow cobbled streets, whole families, crowding through the turnstiles, eager to pay a shilling for the pleasure of seeing scenes of bloody murder, torture, and execution of traitors to the English crown. Dad had taken her there when she was nine or ten. She remembered feeding the ravens on the green and standing in line for ages on a hot afternoon, shuffling slowly past a glass case containing the crown jewels. All that had ended in 1939.

The Tower had been closed for the duration and was still closed to visitors. Scaffolding and building tools around the base of the Byward Tower and buttress wall showed where renovation works were being carried out to underpin their foundations, and today the streets were deserted.

They came to the Ministry of Works entrance where two officials in navy blue uniforms and peaked hats occupied a green-painted wooden hut. Both looked well past retirement age, as though their role was a sinecure for loyal service. One of them came forward with a plywood clipboard, his pencil poised above the attached list, ducked down to look inside the car and his face broke into a wide smile when he saw Teddy.

‘To what do we owe the pleasure, your Royal Highness? Do you want me to call out the guard, sir?’

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‘No, don’t bother with any of the ceremonial stuff, Vic. It’s purely a personal visit today. I’m showing a friend of mind around. I’ll let Sir Arthur and his wife know I’m on the site.’

‘Will you be needing the master keys, sir?’

‘Yes, I might as well take them. I’ll make sure you get them back when we leave.’

Vic scampered back into the wooden hut and seconds later a second uniformed attendant emerged smiling and greeted Teddy. ‘How-do, sir. More renovations, is it?’

‘They’re all well in hand without me. But I need to check on a few security matters.’

Vic returned and handed over a fat bunch of keys. ‘You can park up by the Bloody Tower, sir. We’ll make sure no-one touches the vehicle.’

Sally had gleaned every scrap of information she could from the wooden hut and the two uniformed attendants. Vic’s clip board sheet had carried the name of the Ministry of Works and a Whitehall phone number and telegraphic address. There was at least one external telephone line to the hut and she had caught a glimpse of a standard GPO instrument as they drove past the door. There was a small yellow enamel sign over the door, reading ‘You may telephone from here’ so the phone was connected to a public telephone exchange.

Then there was the mention of a Sir Arthur and his wife. If they lived on the site, they, too might have a phone. Perhaps too risky. Whoever Sir Arthur was, he could be a confederate of Teddy’s.

She drove towards the Bloody Tower. ‘What’s the hand you need?’

‘That can wait for a bit. First I’ve just got to make a quick courtesy call to Sir Arthur Guinness – he’s the Lieutenant Yeoman Warder of the Tower. There’s no need for you to come. You stay here, I won’t be more than ten minutes.’ He fished the bunch of keys out of his pocket. ‘You can brush up on your English history while I’m gone.’

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Teddy led the way to an ancient wooden door, studded with iron and set in a gothic arch at the base of the Bloody Tower. He unlocked the door and pushed it wide. On the wall inside the door was a wooden panel with switches for the overhead lights. He swiped his palm down the switches. Edwardian era lights lit a room that was a mock-up of a medieval dungeon. Its high stone walls contained a thousand years of the most imaginative and painful means of torture and death the human mind had been able to devise: the ducking stool, the scold's bridle, the iron boot, the pincers being heated in realistic looking red hot coals. The middle of the room was occupied by a wooden rack, complete with waxwork prisoner being stretched between ropes tied at his ankles and wrists, and waxwork jailors working the long wooden handle that stretched the poor wretch's joints still further. From the high beamed ceiling, felons hung in iron gibbets, their clothes in rags, stuffed crows pecking at their eyes.

He grinned mischievously. 'Make yourself at home. Have fun.' He let the creaking door swing closed on its hinges.

She waited as his footsteps died away and immediately began taking stock. Her first thought was that she was probably under observation from another room, perhaps one high up and she scanned the walls for some peephole, but could see none. But there were too many places among the masonry where some such spyhole could be concealed, so she was compelled to act as though she were being watched.

At the rear of the chamber an arch was partly visible behind a tapestry, hanging from hooks on a brass rail. It depicted some medieval monarch and his courtiers on horseback, hunting a white hart. It was clearly designed to conceal a door. From above the hanging, wires emerged and ran, stapled to the mortar between stones, up and along the exterior wall where they disappeared at the height of the ceramic insulators she had seen outside. It was unquestionably a telephone wire.

Beyond the arched doorway, beyond the tapestry hanging, was almost certainly a small office where there stood a telephone on a desk or table. A telephone connected to the public network. A

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phone on which she had only to dial '111' or even just tap three times in rapid succession on the phone hook.

Two months before D-Day, Sally had stayed with an elderly couple above a laundry in St Nazaire. Their radio operator had been caught up by the Gestapo in a routine sweep at the local railway station but the radio was intact and the local network had dozens of messages backed up about two of the "ski" sites for launching V1 flying bombs that London was so anxious to get. Sally risked exposure to cycle to St Nazaire and spend a few days with her new 'auntie Giselle and uncle Ferdinand.' Within 24 hours, the SS radio-detection cars had triangulated the transmissions and the Gestapo were knocking on doors. The elderly couple pleaded with her to leave. She was minutes away from sending, but the Germans were minutes away from their front door. She had come to France for just one reason. To fail to send now would be almost criminally negligent. She could hear the voices of the German soldiers. The old woman grabbed her arm, fingers biting into the muscle, and said, 'We must go. Now.' Sally accepted the inevitable, put a match to her carefully coded sheet and they left via the back door into the garden, through an old orchard, wading through thistles, cornflowers and red campion like a floral lake, pollen and scent cascading all around her as she ran, and into the woods at the rear. Her raincoat, her Sten gun, her bike all left behind.

She had run then because a primal instinct told her it was better to live to fight another day. Now from somewhere deep inside, the same cold voice of reason spoke to her. This was a test. She knew that. It was a trap. Either there was no telephone or it had been disconnected from the public phone network. She still had not found the bomb or even identified its exact location. There was much of value she could tell those waiting to hear from her, but not that single definitive, conclusive fact that would enable Peter Stanhope's Paras to swing into decisive action. She must stick at it. Find the bomb.

She turned away from the door with its tapestry hanging and instead affected interest in the Iron Maiden of Nuremberg in which a waxwork prisoner was confined, metal spikes on the heavy door

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aligned with his eyes and other sensitive parts of his emaciated body.

The tower door re-opened and Teddy reappeared, his mood apparently transformed for the better. ‘Sorry to leave you with this macabre old stuff. Doesn’t speak very highly of our ancestors, does it? I’ve finished all my business now. Come outside and have a look – there’s something I’d like to show you.’

He locked the Bloody Tower and led her across the cobbled courtyard to the stone emplacements lining the riverside. The green-grey Thames swirled in brown-grey patches against wooden posts, slimy with weed. The river was running high and strings of lighters travelled in both directions, pulled by tugs of the Gazelee and Sun lines. She could smell the dirty grey waters and hear the regular slap of water against the embankment walls.

‘This is one of my favourite parts of the Tower – Traitor’s Gate. Edward the first built it as part of the original tower so he could have his enemies brought in by boat from the Thames to be tortured and executed. You see this pool and the steps? The guards inside would raise the portcullis, the boat with its cargo would be rowed from the river into the pool, the gate lowered again and the prisoner would mount the steps and be taken to the Bloody Tower for questioning. You’ve seen how the questioning was done.’

‘Sounds pretty horrible. Who decides who’s a traitor and who’s not, anyway?’

‘Ah. That’s the whole point, isn’t it? Don’t you know the old rhyme? “Treason never prospers. The reason? If it prospers, none dare call it treason.” All that matters is whether you’re successful or not. If you are, then it’s the victors who write the history, isn’t it?’

Below them, the oily green grey tide was slapping at the stone embankment and the wooden piles held to it by rusting metal bands. There was a vessel in the pool, empty now but recently entered through Traitor’s Gate. It was a Thames lighter, but not like those plying on the river. This lighter had iridescent patches leaking from what could only be an engine at the rear, forming rainbow rings on the surface of the moat. On the dockside, above the lighter, was an A-frame with chains and Weston chain pulleys – lifting gear

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for a very heavy object. The pine beams of the A-frame were bright and clean. It was purpose-made and it was new.

Was he actually trying to tell her something by showing her this? Taking her into his confidence? Boasting? She was as sure as she could be without the evidence of her own eyes the bomb, device, whatever it was, had been brought here today. It was now installed somewhere in the labyrinth of cellars of the Tower, where it would never be discovered by chance. The only thing she couldn't know was whether the crucial component, the core had yet been installed.

She said in what she hoped was a bored voice. 'Very depressing. So what's this hand you said you wanted?'

'Let's crack on with it right away. Follow me.' And Teddy began striding across the green towards the Wakefield tower. He used the master keys to unlock two modern security locks sealing the outer oak doors and heaved them open. On the wall inside was an electrical alarm system which he switched to the 'safe' position. At the foot of a staircase was a third, steel door with double locks, which he unfastened.

They seemed to be getting closer to the reason for their visit. Sally made a conscious effort not to ask too many questions. Let them come to you, Knight had told her. Buckingham led the way up the spiral stone staircase, speaking over his shoulder. 'You're going to get a close up private view very few get to see.'

At the top, they emerged into a spacious circular chamber, set up so members of the public could file past the armoured glass cases that lined the walls and floor. It was a chamber Sally had filed slowly through as a child of nine or ten, like millions of other tourists to see the most valuable treasure in England, the crown jewels.

In the cases before them sparkled the royal regalia, depicted in magazines and newspapers: the St Edward Crown, the Imperial State crown set with the Black Prince's ruby, the Sovereign's Orb and Sceptre, surmounted by the massive Cullinan diamond, along with the heavily jewel-encrusted Sword of Offering.

'This is usually the safest place for them but because of the security situation I've decided to remove them to a place of greater

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safety – the strong room at Ivinghoe Abbey – that’s where they were kept during the war in case of an invasion.’

‘Do you have the right to do that? Don’t you have to ask permission or something?’

‘I could waste a morning talking to piffling civil servants and signing legal forms but I’d really rather not. I am the Constable of the Tower. These jewels and everything else in these precincts is my responsibility. I’m exercising that responsibility for the good of the nation, on behalf of the sovereign.’

He unlocked the cupboards beneath the glass cabinets and began to remove metal cases and leather bags stored there for use when transporting the treasures. Then he casually unlocked the glass cases above and started removing their contents. He said, ‘Lend a hand,’ and pointed to the largest metal case. Not knowing what else to do, Sally opened the metal case and held it while Teddy lifted the St Edward Crown from its purple velvet cushion and placed it in the box. It felt much heavier than it looked.

He handed her treasure after treasure at such speed she could hardly keep up with him, her hands trembling as she closed lids and buckled straps. What in hell’s name were they doing? What *she* was doing? Was she assisting in an essential act of preservation or was she an accomplice to the most monstrous robbery of the century?

Any second someone might enter the jewel Tower and catch them in the act of stealing the most valuable treasure in England. Yet she knew no-one was going to come, and even if they did, Buckingham would smooth it all over in no time. But she had more important things to worry about. Even if this was some kind of royal smash and grab raid, there was a bigger crime to stop. She just had to go with the tide of events.

It took them less than half an hour to pack all the regalia in their purpose-made holdalls, lug them downstairs and stack them neatly in the boot of the Alvis. As she drove slowly back to the main gate, her pulse rate rose faster and faster as they neared the wooden hut. She tried and failed to think of some way to raise the alarm that would not also be seen by Buckingham. She stopped the car by the

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hut and Vic came out to meet them with his clipboard. Teddy handed the bunch of master keys back to him.

‘Not removing anything from the premises today, are we Your Royal Highness?’

‘Only the Crown Jewels.’

He grinned at the customary joke. ‘Oh. That’s all right then, sir.’

‘That sign of yours reminds me, can I make a quick call while I’m here?’

Vic shook his head. ‘I’m sorry, sir. That’s only an old sign. They disconnected the phones back in 1939. They just work internally now. Sir Arthur’s got an outside phone if it’s urgent.’

‘Never mind,’ he said. ‘It can wait until we get back home.’

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Thirty Five

Teddy directed her to drive round the gravel turning circle to the front entrance of Ivinghoe Abbey, rather than to the garages at the rear. Woodruff appeared at once as they were getting out and Teddy instructed him, ‘We’ve a few things to unload – they’re going to the Blenheim Room.’

Between the three of them they carried the leather cases through the hall, up the great staircase and to the east wing. The Blenheim Room was evidently the master bedroom of the house and appeared to be Teddy’s own bedchamber. Teddy bid Woodruff put the cases on the bed, a full tester, valanced from floor to ceiling in gold and burgundy, saying, ‘We’ll take it from here.’

As well as the vast bed, the room also contained two massive mahogany compactum wardrobes of the kind favoured by Victorian gentlemen, with hanging space either side of a chest of drawers above which was a linen press. The central door that covered these contained a huge mirror, six feet tall.

Teddy began undoing the straps and catches of the leather cases. ‘Let’s see what we’ve got, shall we?’

He extracted each of the jewelled pieces and laid them out on the bed. He spread his arm over them like an auctioneer proudly pointing out a prize lot to his audience, ‘Do you know how much this little lot are worth? It’s well over £100 million.’ He picked up the sceptre with its massive diamond setting. ‘The Star of Africa diamond alone is worth £10 million.’

‘So what are you planning to do? Sell them off at Sotheby’s?’

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He got up and went to the right hand of the two large wardrobes. He opened the central mirror to reveal not the usual drawers for gentlemen's apparel but a dark green steel door of a strong-room that had been built into the wall.

'This is where they spent the war, for safety. I think they'll be safe here again.' He left the strong-room door and came back to the bed. 'But we're not in any hurry are we? Let's play a little game of make believe.'

'What do you mean?'

He didn't reply but opened a slim leather satchel, took out an ermine cape and draped it around her shoulders, knotting the silken ties below her neck. Then he casually picked up the St Edward crown and placed it in mock ceremony on her head and placed the royal sceptre in her hand. 'Feel like a queen yet?'

He led her by the arm to the mirror and asked, 'What do you see? I see a woman who could be the Duchess of Buckingham. I see a woman who could be Queen of England.'

Sally's pulse raced as she stared in wonderment at the looking glass. She could see the transformation that Teddy had seen – she seemed to tower over everything in the room; the crown giving her larger than human stature, making her face both stern and beautiful, the glitter of diamonds reflected in her pale eyes, the glint of gold on her face and arms. She glowed with queenly authority.

She wrestled for a moment or two with the conceit taking hold of her before turning away from the looking glass to face him. 'I thought that job was already taken,' she said, flushing bright red.

'What, poor stammering cousin Bertie? He would jump at the chance to be rid of the responsibility, believe me. And so would most British people who have to cringe with embarrassment every time he opens his mouth and stutters into the microphone. The only person who would be disappointed would be that little Scottish harridan of a wife.'

She reached to take off the crown. 'No, leave it on – come and look at this.' He led her to the window, and showed her the magnificent view of Ivinghoe Beacon and the Chiltern Hills. He pointed to the hilltop. 'I meant what I said up there. How would you

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like to own all this? You can, you know. You can be mistress of everything you see.'

Sally placed the sceptre on the bed and carefully took off the crown. 'You're making me nervous, Teddy. What is it you're planning? Tell me what this is really about.'

'I told you before, this country is like a family with the wrong people in charge.'

'What do you mean by the wrong people? Who are the right people? You?'

He grinned. 'You know that old joke – a camel is a horse designed by a committee? Well Britain is a country designed by a committee – a committee of unimaginative, self-serving political hacks.'

'And what would Britain be like if the right people were in charge?'

'If you want to know the answer to that just look at Germany under Hitler. Oh I know he was a maniac who got what he deserved. But whatever you think of his policies, his military strategies, his barbarity, you can't deny he transformed Germany in just seven years from a bankrupt wasteland and one of the weakest countries in the world to the strongest. That's what can be done when the right people are in charge – people who know what they are doing and are not afraid to do it.'

Here finally was something of the real Buckingham, but it was like seeing him in a broken mirror. His dismissal of Hitler only rang half-true and seemed to be for her benefit. It occurred to her for the first time that he might literally be two people.

'I can see your hesitation, Sally. But I also sense you're almost waking up from your long sleep – the sleep most people have allowed to dull their minds and their senses to the most obvious truth. Why don't you take that final step – wake up completely?'

'Wake up to what?'

'Wake up to your destiny. Oswald Mosley was wrong about a lot of things but he was right about one thing – sooner or later in the lives of great nations comes a moment of decision, comes a

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moment of destiny. And the same is true for great people. This is your moment of decision, Sally, your moment of destiny.'

Now he was starting to sound more and more like some English version of the Fuhrer, ranting about mad dreams. Yet in the same moment he changed like quicksilver to the other Buckingham, the one who had taken her to the top of Ivinghoe Beacon.

'You and I might not agree about everything, but we certainly agree about the big important issues, like providing equality of opportunity for people of every class and colour. And specially providing equality for women.

'You can criticise the Third Reich for many things but you can't accuse Hitler of being prejudiced against women in men's roles. How many British test pilots like Hannah Reich can you name? How many women film directors like Leni Riefenstahl? I'll tell you – practically none. Because as far as Westminster and Whitehall are concerned the little woman's place is in the home – or in the schoolroom.'

Ever since Margery Cavendish had warned her against him, Sally had prepared herself against any sadistic impulses Teddy might have. When it came, the sting of the lash was delivered not with a dressage whip but with a truth that cut more painfully and more deeply.

He took her silence as agreement. 'An enlightened society is one in which women are accorded their rightful place as the equal of men and valued in their own right. Britain as it is today is an unenlightened society – like the backward nations of Africa – where women are second class citizens whose role is to do as they're told. Follow along two paces behind their men with water jars on their head. I want to change all that, but I can't do it all alone. I need a powerful woman at my side to do it. I need you.'

As he spoke, the veins stood out on Teddy's forehead. His face told her that he meant every word and that he had opened up his innermost feelings and revealed himself to her completely. When he recovered himself there was an awkward silence for several moments while she said nothing. 'Perhaps you think I'm wasting my time . . .'

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He was so honest and so hurt Sally couldn't help herself. She placed a hand on his arm and found herself protesting, 'No. No, you're not wasting your time. It's just that . . . it's just that . . . this was the last thing I was expecting. You've caught me by surprise. I need time to think about all this. . .'

Teddy busied himself with the mundane business of packing the regalia away in its cases and depositing them carefully in the strong-room. When he had closed the door he turned to her. 'The sun's over the yard-arm – I feel like celebrating. Let's go down to the library and I'll organise some fizz.'

They sat on the two sofas facing each other in front of the fireplace in the library while Woodruff delivered a silver ice-bucket containing a bottle of Dom Pérignon 1937, and three glasses. 'I hope you don't mind too much, but I've invited my chief of staff, Herr Berlin, to join us in this little celebration. It's rather important I keep him sweet at the moment with everything so uncertain, so I'd appreciate it if you'd back me up and put on a united front to please me. Got to keep the staff happy.'

As he spoke, Woodruff showed the tall German into the library.

Kammler had dispensed with his odd headgear and his dark glasses. He was dressed, like Teddy, in the country tweeds of an English gentleman enjoying a weekend's shooting but unlike Teddy, who looked relaxed and at home, he appeared stiff and uncomfortable. He bowed to Sally and murmured, 'Guten Abend, Fraulein.'

Teddy said, 'It's time you two got acquainted. I expect you are going to be seeing a lot of each other in future.'

Sally spoke in German, 'What part of Germany are you from, Herr Berlin?'

Kammler said, 'Why from the capital, of course, as my name suggests.'

'Really? From your accent I would have said somewhere further south. Mittel Franconia perhaps?'

Kammler seemed thrown by the extent of her knowledge and by being contradicted by a woman.

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‘Well, I say Berlin for simplicity’s sake. But you’re quite right, my family come from Bavaria originally. Not many people have your depth of knowledge Fraulein. Do you know Germany well?’

‘My mother is a travel writer, so I spent several holidays there as a child. A place called Wilhelmsdorf.’

‘Where they make the drawing instruments? I know it – near Nuremberg. It is an industrial town. Inferior to my home town in every respect.’

In any other circumstances, Sally would have spat in his eye, but for the sake of her cover she smiled and said, ‘If you say so.’

Teddy removed the foil and wire cage from the champagne bottle, then expertly removed the cork with just a whisper – ‘Like a maiden’s sigh,’ he confided, apparently oblivious to the duel of words between them.

‘What exactly are we celebrating?’ Sally wanted to know as he filled the glasses and handed one to ‘Herr Berlin’ and one to her.

He raised his glass. ‘How about, to destiny?’

‘To destiny,’ she echoed and they drank.

Thirty Six

Sally woke and knew at once something was wrong. The window was closed, the morning sun high and the room stuffy. She was lying fully clothed on the bed in her room. With some effort she raised her arm to look at the time but found her wristwatch was gone. She tried to get up and her back arched in pain – every muscle in her body hurt. She tried again and this time managed to put her legs over the side of the bed, but when she tried to stand, she was so weak she simply fell back onto the bed again.

Her tongue felt swollen, she had a metallic taste in her mouth and knew she'd been drugged. She shook her head to try to clear it and forced herself to stand up. The blood beat at her temples as though she were drunk. She remembered the champagne and the toast. What a bloody fool she had been to think she could outwit someone as dangerous as Buckingham.

She staggered to the bathroom, ran the cold tap and doused her face repeatedly with her cupped hands before she began to feel in control of her limbs again. She examined herself pityingly in the bathroom cabinet mirror. Her face had a sickly pale grey pallor and her makeup was a mess. She made herself walk back to the bedroom and found her evening bag. She looked inside and found her car keys were missing. She looked for her wristwatch and shoes but they were gone, too. She walked back to the bathroom, taking deep breaths with each step, the oxygen clearing her head. This time she washed her face thoroughly and re-did her makeup.

Standing with both hands on the edge of the sink, she looked at herself in the cabinet mirror, silently calling herself every kind of bloody fool alive. She opened the cabinet and found an old bottle of Aspirin that still had a few white tablets in it. She took three and

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crunched them in her teeth, washing the bitter taste down with a tooth-mug of water.

Why the hell had they drugged her? If she'd given herself away, they would simply have killed her. Either Buckingham was disappointed with her response to his crazy proposal and wanted time to work on her. Or, more likely, Kammler had put his foot down and told Buckingham to get her out of the way – neutralise a potential complication while they completed the bomb and made their move.

She stuck her fingers down her throat to make herself sick but nothing came. Her face, neck and arms flushed red. It wasn't nausea that was welling up from deep inside it was murderous anger. That bastard Buckingham and his Nazi thugs had tossed her aside like a piece of meat. It was the biggest mistake of their lives.

She did something she hadn't done for a long time. She pulled her hair back in a very tight pleat like she used to in France and pinned it. In a fight, never give your enemy anything to grab onto. Instinct told her it was going to be that kind of a day.

She tried the bedroom door and found it locked. The house seemed abnormally quiet as though everyone in it had left and she was alone. But that seemed unlikely. Buckingham would not leave his base of operations open and unguarded. Was one of his Nazi thugs stationed outside her door?

She crossed to the window, stood on the window sill and looked down, trying to see as much as possible of the front of the house. There were no vehicles, either here or outside the garage wing. She looked left and right and caught a movement out of the corner of her eye. It was the crew-cut man in the combat jacket from the garage courtyard – 'Johnny', though Johann was more like it. She stood perfectly still until he had passed under her window and mercifully did not look up. Once his back was to her, she put her face close to the glass to see as much as possible and made out that he had a Schmeisser machine pistol slung over his shoulder on a webbing strap.

If she was right about there being five or six of the terrorists, it seemed unlikely Buckingham would have left more than one man

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on guard given they must have a hard day's work to do. Feeling more confident, she picked the lock of her bedroom door and looked around. Her guess had been right and she was alone upstairs.

She walked quietly down the staircase in her bare feet. When she reached the bottom, she waited until the outside sentry had passed both windows either side of the main door, then crossed quickly to the library door. It was locked. She walked quickly back to the rear entrance and found this locked, too, but this time the key was in the lock. She turned it as quietly as possible and opened the door a few inches, ready to slam it shut and lock it again if need be.

In the library, all the servants of the house were gathered. Sitting unspeaking and looking worried she found Woodruff, Cook and her kitchen maids, three young housemaids, the old man from the stables with his lad and two young boys in gardener's clothes.

Woodruff got to his feet and approached her with an anxious expression. 'Oh, Miss. Why do we all have to wait in here? How much longer do we have to wait? Do you know what's going on?'

'I don't know any more than you do, yet. But I'm bloody well going to find out. Who put you here?'

'It was Mister Edward's new chief of staff, Miss – the German gentleman, Herr Berlin. He instructed me to get all the staff together in here about two hours ago. Then he and his new men – I think you know the people I mean – came and told us there was a high security alert and we must all stay in here until Mister Edward comes back and gives us the all-clear. He said he was locking us in and leaving a guard for our protection.'

'Are there any vehicles left here?'

'I couldn't say what's left, Miss. We heard them all driving off. I know they took that army lorry with them. They made a big fuss about loading it with something – glass or something breakable, I think.'

'Is everyone accounted for here?'

'Everyone except her ladyship. They told us she had driven up to the Duke of Ayrshire's at Dunblane.'

'What time is it now?' She asked.

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‘They took all our watches, Miss. But going by the chimes of the clock in the stable-yard it’s about 9:30 now.’

‘Is there a working telephone anywhere in the house, or on the estate?’

‘Not as far as I know, Miss. They were all disconnected some days ago.’

‘Where is the nearest place that would have a telephone?’

‘Ivinghoe village would be your best bet, Miss. There’s a pub in the high street. And a phone box.’

‘Do you know how many men are outside?’

‘We’ve only seen one, Miss. But I must warn you he’s got some kind of gun.’

‘Right, Woodruff. I’d advise you and the others to stay here for the time being. I’m going to deal with the man outside. Please keep the youngsters away from the windows for a bit.’

‘Very well, Miss. I’ll do as you ask.’

She walked back through the house retracing the route she had followed the day before, until she reached the Flower Room. Here she found the walking boots she had worn on her walk up Ivinghoe Beacon. She laced the boots extra tightly – this time she was going to use them for more than just walking. She went back again, first via the kitchen where she selected a 12-inch Sheffield steel knife that had seen many years’ service carving roast beef joints. Then she returned to the library, picked the lock of the *trompe l’oeil* study door. Inside, on the desk, was the Mauser C96 pistol in its presentation case. She checked the mechanism to make sure it still worked and found it had been oiled. She looked in the magazine. There were six rounds. She tucked the pistol into the waistband of her slacks, next to her spine, under the back of her jumper. After days of pretence, uncertainty and inaction, she could finally become herself again and do what she did best. She felt cool as steel and her hands were without even a trace of nerves.

She waited inside the front door as the sentry walked slowly past then turned to come back again, idly kicking the gravel. She wanted to meet him face to face to allay his suspicions, rather than put him on guard by coming at him from behind. When he was a

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dozen feet from the door, walking her way, she opened it, stepped casually out and sauntered towards him, hands in pockets.

He reacted in the same way she had seen Nazi troops react in France a dozen times. He hadn't the remotest inkling she could be in any way a threat to him and simply held up both arms, crossing and uncrossing them as though signalling a traffic diversion round a hole in the road.

He said, 'Nein, nein, nein, Fraulein', in the voice a vexed parent uses to reprimand a naughty child.

Sally continued to walk towards him, smiling. When she was just feet away, suspicion began to dawn in his face and he reached for the Schmeisser. Before he could bring it round, she kicked him once, very hard in the shin and heard the bone crack under the impact of the walking boot. The man involuntarily bent double in agony, but Sally already had both hands behind his head and was bringing up her knee into his face as he lunged forward. He collapsed unconscious onto the gravel, his face bloody. Sally unhooked the sling of the Schmeisser from his shoulder and arm and slung the weapon over her own shoulder. She started to walk away in the direction of the garage wing when the man recovered consciousness enough to lunge out from a prone position, grabbing at her ankle.

A voice with a Scots accent was saying in her head, guns are noisy and unpredictable. Don't waste a bullet if you don't have to. She drew the carving knife from her waistband, turned and knelt in one movement.

She saw several pale young faces at the library window and then Woodruff herding them away, realising what was about to happen. She stabbed his hand to release the grip and then cut his throat across the carotid artery. He fell back gurgling on the path, blood gushing onto the drive and soaking into the gravel. She wiped the blade on his combat jacket. Always keep your weapons clean. You don't know when you'll need them again.

She didn't wait but ran around to the stable yard and through to the garages beyond. The shabby blue doors were open and the lorry was gone. Only her Alvis was left behind, sitting in the middle

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of the courtyard, doors locked, keys missing from the ignition. She unslung the machine pistol and used the folding metal butt to smash the catch of the front quarterlight window. She forced it open until she could get her hand in far enough to open the driver's door. Sitting in the driver's seat, she used the carving knife to prise open the fibreboard panel under the dash and reached inside for the wires that led to the ignition switch.

She broke off the soldered joints and pulled the wires through, then used the knife to strip the blue and red indiarubber insulation from the two ends. She reached into the leather pocket in the door and found her driving gloves, put them on and twisted the bare metal ends together. The leads sparked and the engine coughed into life. She slammed it into first, put her foot down and headed for the long drive out of the park.

She scanned the long estate drive on either side of the road in case there should be another guard but saw no-one. Her urge to lash out in fury was so strong that she felt disappointed there was no-one else there to deal with – one man in particular. She drove straight through the wooden five-barred gate at the lodge, splintering it to matchwood, as being the closest thing she could lay hands on to Teddy Buckingham. She turned onto the road that ran east to Ivinghoe village. There was no other traffic about.

She floored the accelerator pedal and the engine howled as she sped along the lanes. After a couple of miles, she encountered a dark figure ahead on a bicycle and found it was the local constable on his rounds. She squealed to a halt beside him. 'Constable, I am Major Sally Honeychurch of the Secret Intelligence Service. It's essential I find a telephone as quickly as possible – can you help me?'

The constable left his bike on the grass verge and leaned in the passenger window. 'There's the pub miss, but they won't be open yet. The best bet is for you to drive to the police station in Yardley – it's only another four miles.'

'Please get in and show me the way – it really is very urgent I contact my HQ.'

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The constable cast a hesitant glance at the official bicycle. ‘I suppose I can come back later for it . . .’ and climbed in.

Sally put her foot down, clipping hedgerows on the bends, the constable holding onto the dashboard and shouting directions above the engine whine. Within minutes they pulled up outside a red brick police station on the outskirts of Yardley village. She left the engine running and hurried into the station, followed by the constable. She pushed noisily through double doors into the reception area where an elderly desk sergeant looked up in surprise.

The constable started to say, ‘This young lady –’ but Sally cut him short. ‘Sergeant, I’m Major Sally Honeychurch of the Secret Intelligence Service –’

The door to the inner office opened and a tall, imposing red-faced man in Inspector’s uniform stepped out slowly with a puzzled expression on his face. ‘Inspector, I’m on government business and it’s essential I use your telephone immediately.’

The officer had a practised soothing voice. ‘Now calm down, miss and we’ll have a sit down and sort it all out for you. We are the police, you know.’

‘Sir, you must realise this is a matter of life and death. I have to act now. Without delay.’

The inspector nodded in agreement. ‘Yes. Yes, life and death. Now it’s nothing a nice cup of tea and a chat won’t put right.’

Frustrated beyond boiling point, Sally reached behind to her waistband and drew the Mauser. She barked, ‘Put your hands on your head and get over there against that wall. Face the wall.’

The constable and the sergeant immediately did as she ordered. The Inspector half raised his hands in the air and remained standing facing her defiantly.

‘You’re not helping yourself by playing with guns, Miss. The sergeant and I were in the last war and we know how to –’

Sally fired a round into the floor between his feet. Wood splintered up into his face. ‘Shut up and keep quiet. Pick up that phone and dial 111.’

The Inspector spat contemptuously, ‘That’s not even a real phone number.’

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Sally cocked the Mauser. 'Dial it. Now.'

He dialled 111 and was astonished to hear an immediate reply. Sally grabbed the phone from his hand. She began, 'This is –'

The unknown male voice said, 'Hold on Major. I'm putting you through.'

The sounds of her call being patched through a manual switchboard were followed seconds later by Stanhope answering. 'Where are you Sally?'

'That's not important. Please take this down. The terrorists are definitely Nazis – an estimated six men, led by SS General Franz Kammler. Their British leader is Edward Buckingham. The bomb is almost certainly located in the Tower of London, somewhere near to Traitor's Gate – I believe they are on their way there now. If you send your men –'

'That's not going to be possible.'

'What do you mean?'

'The Cabinet ordered me and my Paras out of London at 17:00 hours last night. We are now based in Oxford until further orders.'

'Isn't there anyone left in London?'

'Just a few skeleton crews on the outskirts. No-one in the centre, I'm afraid. Well, there is someone. Sergeant Jacobs has been sleeping in a service vehicle outside your flat for the past two days. I ordered him out of London on pain of court martial and he refused. As far as I know he's still there.'

'Can you contact him?'

There was a muffled conversation and Stanhope came back on the line. 'Apparently he has a field radio with him. If the battery's still good he should be contactable.'

'Please tell him to meet me outside Tower Hill underground station – that's the old Mark Lane station. I should be there in about 60 to 70 minutes from now. And not to disclose himself to anyone.'

'You're not driving back into London, for God's sake?'

'There's still a chance to stop them. I think I know where they are.'

'It's suicide, Sally.'

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‘It’s a long shot, I’ll give you that. But we haven’t got anything else, have we?’

‘Is there . . . is there any message you want me to give Jacobs?’

‘Tell him to fill an extra mag. He’ll know what it means.’

‘Sally . . .’

‘Sir?’

‘I know what it means, too. For God’s sake be careful.’

The line went dead.

Thirty Seven

Sally parked the Alvis two blocks north of the underground station serving the Tower in a street that was empty of both cars and people. She disconnected the ignition leads under the dash and walked carefully southwards, keeping in the narrow shadows cast by sunlight on the pavement under the tall office blocks.

Before the war, in summer season, hundreds of thousands of tourists jostled their way up the escalators and through the metal trellis gates of the station but now she found it strangely silent and deserted. She couldn't see a single soul. What had happened to create a desert out of one of London's busiest districts?

When she reached the front of the station she found the reason. The metal grille gates were padlocked closed and an improvised chalked sign announced abruptly, 'No Trains'.

She moved as silently and unobtrusively as possible across the forecourt of the tube station and crouched beneath a pair of laburnum trees. Concealed among the weeping branches, she could see down to the paved walkway that led to the green-painted wooden hut that marked the entrance for tourists before the war. She could see beyond as far as the Bloody Tower and Wakefield Tower where she had parked her Alvis on her previous visit with Buckingham. She couldn't see Traitor's Gate as it was beyond the battlements that fringed the Thames and was below the level of the wall, but parked close by was a three-ton Bedford QLR Army lorry. They had changed the plates but she could tell it was the same one from the dull patches on the mudguards where Army insignia had been stripped off

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Buckingham, Kammler and their men had visited this place to make preparations to detonate their bomb. Probably to install the core. Either they were still here, or they had completed their work and left for the place from which they intended to set the thing off – wherever that was.

She scanned the approach road. How would she do it, if she were in charge? She wouldn't take the chance of leaving an important primed explosive charge alone and vulnerable to counter measures. She would either booby trap it, with mines or she would leave a couple of her maddest and most aggressive people to guard it until getting a signal to leave at the last possible moment. Or both, if it was a really big charge.

She tried to detect any movement in the green wooden hut guarding the entrance, where she'd seen the uniformed officials on her previous visit. Seeing nothing from where she was concealed, she decided to work her way across the road to the entrance to take a closer look. She ran in a crouching position across to the far pavement and worked her way along the low wall to the driveway entrance. Either she was unnoticed, or whoever was on guard was waiting for a better shot.

She worked her way, crouching, to the wooden hut, trying to keep it between her and as much of the Tower as possible, using it as mobile cover. When she reached it, she could tell at once her guess was right. The windows had been smashed and the ground was littered with shattered glass fragments. The door was ajar and she could see a pair of legs lying in a tangle under the desk in a dark pool of blood that was already congealing on the floorboards around the dark blue of the uniform.

Sally peered cautiously around the edge of the hut and was met instantly by a prolonged burst of intense automatic fire. She had no time to see where it was coming from but had to draw back as far as possible, still keeping the hut between her and the Tower. Even so bullets were passing through both walls and hitting the pavement around her, throwing up stone chips that stung face and hands. She crawled further away on her belly and arms, keeping low. She slowly got all the way back to the outside wall and threw herself

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over it. Once she'd got something solid between her and the gunmen, she leaned back against the wall, legs splayed, and caught her breath. The hailstorm of fire continued behind her, undiminished, pinning her down.

When the gunmen paused to changed magazines, she worked her way on her belly up Tower Hill until she was out of their line of sight and then scrambled back across the road and circled back to the underground station forecourt.

She returned to her original observation post among the laburnums. Frontal assault was out of the question – she'd be dead before she'd gone a hundred feet. But there didn't seem to be any other way around. She cupped her hands around her eyes to shut out the glare of sunlight and screwed up her eyes to try for a clearer look at the killing ground that was the entrance, scanning for the slightest clue to a weak point but saw none. A soft, almost inaudible voice beside her said, 'Try these, ma'am.'

She looked around sharply and found the grinning face of sergeant Danny Jacobs. He was crouching low beside her, holding up a pair of army field glasses.

'Thank God it's you, Danny. I thought I was going to have to do this job alone. And I've already used up my nine lives.'

'You can't get rid of me that easily, ma'am.'

She pointed back to the closed tube station entrance and the chalkboard. 'Where the hell is everyone? What's all this about no trains?'

'They turned off the current the day before yesterday – about four in the morning. To stop the commuters coming in to work. They put out a story that it was a terrorist attack on the national grid. We had to go out in lorries and round up the night workers and stragglers who couldn't get home.'

'That must have thinned out the numbers a hell of a lot.'

'What with that and closing the public offices, they reckon there's hardly anyone left in the centre.'

She took the field glasses he offered and scanned the whole area but still saw no sign of movement.

'What have we got here, then, ma'am?'

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‘We’ve got up to six men with automatic weapons, guarding the approach route down there to Traitor’s Gate – the river entrance. I’m as sure as I can be that’s where the bomb is. My guess is it’s most likely to be a couple of men and possibly booby traps. The trouble is even two men with submachine guns in any one of those towers could hold off a whole army. That’s what the bloody place was built for – to keep invaders like us out. The walls are feet thick stone.’

Danny said, ‘It’s just as well I brought Daisy with me then.’

‘Who’s Daisy?’

‘Come and see, ma’am.’

They backed away, keeping low, and he led her past the station entrance and northwards up the road on the other side of the station. Parked half on the pavement three hundred yards up the street was an armoured car. He lent on the front mudguard with one hand and said proudly, ‘Daisy the Daimler’.

‘How the hell did you get your hands on that thing?’

‘When I refused to leave London, Handsome Harry – I mean the Colonel – said to me, “If you won’t go then I suppose you’d better have some kind of protection,” and he let me keep Daisy.’

‘What’s the armament?’

‘The main gun’s a two pounder. There’s also a machine gun and a Bren.’

‘What about ammo?’

‘We’ve got plenty. And some plastic explosive and grenades. So what’s the plan, ma’am?’

‘Let try driving in the front door and see what happens, shall we?’

They boarded the armoured car and closed the top, peering through the slit in the armour that served instead of a windscreen. Danny fired up the engine and they advanced slowly down the road to the tube station. No reaction. They entered the turning off Tower Hill into the Tower itself and rolled slowly past the wooden hut where she had paused before with Buckingham. ‘Hold on a minute, Danny.’

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She cautiously raised the lid a fraction and looked into the hut. What she found confirmed the brief glimpse of earlier on. The whole place had been sprayed with automatic fire, the windows were broken and whoever had been on duty was sprawled across a desk, face down, limbs twisted and broken. She lowered the lid and locked it.

‘Let’s go slowly.’

The armoured car was halfway between the Bloody Tower and the Wakefield Tower when the shooting started again. Hundreds of rounds of automatic fire were directed at them from both sides. Their solid tyres were shot to pieces in the first minute but they could still manoeuvre.

Sally scanned rapidly back and forth through the slit with the field glasses trained on the Wakefield Tower until she caught a glimpse of a muzzle flash. ‘Up there. Nine o’clock about twenty five feet up – it’s a loophole in the flint.’

Danny loaded the two pounder gun, elevated it and fired where she directed. The first round was high and to the right. The second shattered the loophole high on the wall into a shower of masonry and flint. A massive hole in the facade revealed a figure, white with dust, clutching with both hands at his face, bloodied and blinded by shards of flint. Danny aimed with the Bren and fired a dozen rounds at him. Conscious he was exposed, the white figure groped for his weapon, stumbled forwards and fell through the hole that had been smashed in the masonry. He hit the ground below with a thump and remained motionless in a twisted heap.

The shooter in the Bloody Tower, ceased firing, for fear of giving away his position. Sally scanned the tower for signs of a sniper’s nest. Gulls in search of easy pickings at Billingsgate market flew upriver, their cries haunting in the eerie silence.

She whispered, ‘Danny, he’s in there somewhere. Drive this thing into the door at the base of the tower. I think I know where he must be.’ Jacobs turned the armoured car in a three point turn that crushed part of a wall behind, until the nose of the vehicle was pointed directly at the Gothic wooden door of the Bloody Tower fifty yards away, then accelerated straight for it.

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Centuries old timber splintered with a crack they heard above the Daimler's engines as the armoured car smashed the doorway to jagged fragments. Sally leaped straight into the mocked up torture chamber and sprinted to the end where the tapestry hung on the wall. She ripped it down revealing a door. It wasn't an office the tapestry concealed but a staircase to an upper floor.

She had moved with such decisive speed the man above had little time to react. By the time he appeared at the head of the stairs, machine pistol at the ready, searching for a target, Sally was already flattened against the stair wall pointing her Sten at his position. She fired almost the whole clip into his body, raking him up and down, and stood back into the doorway as his body plunged headlong down the staircase to her feet and lay still, blood staining the stone floor of the Bloody Tower.

She walked back to the armoured vehicle, the Sten hanging loosely from her hand, as Danny lifted the armoured vehicle's lid and stood up. She came up to the doorway and began to climb over the splintered wreckage, Danny reaching down to give her a hand. As he pulled her up a burst of shots rang out from behind him and he fell onto the body of the armoured car. A bullet gashed her left arm, knocking her backwards.

The man who had fallen from the Wakefield Tower was not finished. He had managed to hang onto his weapon and loose off a burst at Danny's back. Ice cold, Sally got up, picked up Danny's fallen Sten, walked over to the foot of the tower and finished him off with two shots to the head.

Danny was still alive, slipping into unconsciousness and bleeding badly from two wounds in his thigh and back. Sally made him as comfortable as she could, attempting some simple first aid with field dressings and iodine from the armoured car's first aid box and put a tourniquet round his leg to stop the blood. The bullet had passed straight through her forearm and she dressed that wound, too. The bandage was unlikely to last long but the tight dressing gave her back some of the use of her arm.

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Danny came round from the shock and tried to grin up at her, his face lopsided. ‘Don’t worry about me, ma’am. You’ve got more important things to sort out.’

She tightened the tourniquet on his leg, apprehensive about the amount of blood he was losing. Looking down at him, lying helpless with the red stain spreading over his tunic, she was inevitably carried back to Orvault, to the Beranger farmhouse and Alain.

Only weeks before D-Day, the effing SS and Gestapo had decided to snare the local resistance network into an action that was bound to be an open battle. The bait was the radio concealed in the attic of the farmhouse. The Gestapo had arrested the Berangers two weeks earlier and made a show of searching but failing to find the hidden attic room. Radio links with London were worth diamonds and Alain led the raiding party to go back and retrieve the wireless set and coding pads, with Sally, Mac, and half a dozen other Maquisards from FREELANCE.

They came in cautiously from the woods behind the farmhouse, fanning out, keeping low. Mac and Pierre Lacompte went straight upstairs to break into the attic. She, Alain and the rest took up positions by the windows in the cramped front parlour, covering the farmyard and barns in front of the building. From the moment they entered, Sally knew something was wrong – some tiny tell-tale sign her instinct had registered but which her conscious mind was too slow to spot. Outside was completely quiet – no animals, no farm activity. It came to her just as Alain stood up in front of the window to get a better look outside.

It was the curtains. There were no curtains at the windows. The Gestapo had taken them down to improve the field of fire. She yelled, ‘Alain. It’s . . .’ But it was too late. The first burst of automatic fire from the hidden men outside caught him full in the chest and he went down, holding onto the window sill, trying to stand again.

Sally dropped her Sten, grabbed his hand and forced him to the floor as the murderous fire storm continued over her head. To her left, Henri Lacompte also fell, dead before he hit the floor. She

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ripped off her silk scarf and pressed it to the worst wound in Alain's chest, the one over his heart. He spoke only once. 'Help me, Sally', and then the light went out of his hazel eyes. His blood had got into his golden hair and she started trying to get it out before it dried. Several hands grabbed her and pulled her away. Outside the window, no more than thirty feet away stood the black-uniformed SS major who had led the onslaught and who had shot Alain. His face was a frozen mask of hatred as he emptied his machine pistol at the farmhouse windows. As Sally got to her feet, his magazine ran out and with it, his luck. In one fluid movement, she stooped, picked up her Sten, aimed it with one hand at him and their eyes met. His face changed from hate to fear and then the realisation he was a dead man as she levelled the Sten at his chest and fired a whole magazine into him.

Back at Orvault she had felt nothing, only a deadness and a feeling of loss. Now, as she held Danny's hand and smiled down at him, she felt an intense, cold anger and an instinctive certainty she was going to stop the terrorists, stop it happening again.

She nodded to the field radio. 'Does that thing still work?'

He gasped, 'Should do. Battery's charged . . . from the motor.'

'See if you can raise your regimental HQ and talk to Colonel Stanhope. Tell him our situation and that the target site is definitely the Tower of London. But tell him to wait until he hears from me before moving any men.'

'What are . . . you . . . going to do?'

'I'm going to try to find this bloody bomb. You'd better keep the lid of this thing closed – just in case.'

Thirty Eight

Sally climbed over the parapet of the Thames embankment and down into the moat formed by Traitor's Gate. She inched her way on tiptoe around a narrow ledge to the far side of the pool where she had seen the lighter moored, her Sten slung round her back, relying mainly on her good right arm to provide a grip.

The A-frame and pulleys she had seen were still bolted into the stonework forming the dock. They were so new she could smell the pine resin. When she reached the A-Frame she could see easily what had been hidden from view when she had stood on the other side of the dock. A set of metal tracks on wooden sleepers had been laid from the dockside and ran into a dark tunnel entrance under the White tower, concealed by thick crenelated walls.

She held the Sten at the ready position and walked cautiously into the tunnel entrance, pausing to let her eyes become accustomed to the dark, her ears straining to catch the tiniest noise. If there were any more of them still here, they were bound to have heard the fire fight above and would be waiting for her, remaining motionless and quiet, holding their breath – and she would be the unmissable centre of a perfect field of fire.

As her eyes adjusted, she saw the tunnel was only twenty feet long and broke out into what must be the cellar of the building above. A light was showing and she could make out details of the distant stonework clearly, so the cellar must have either windows or a skylight. A strange noise made her freeze. Clicking like a machine pistol being cocked but over and over again accompanied by a terrible squealing, an animal like a dog or a bear in distress.

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When she reached the tunnel's end, she lay down and peered round the edge into the stone chamber beyond, keeping her face at ground level. Something sat in the middle of the damp stone-walled cavity about forty feet wide and as long again. A metal casing six feet long and two feet in diameter was bolted to a scaffolding rig, beside which was a man in a blue boiler suit, kneeling with his back to her. He was handcuffed to the scaffolding and was futilely attempting to release the handcuffs, howling in desperation as he did so.

Other than the man, the chamber was empty. Levelling the Sten at his back, Sally entered the room. He turned at the sound of her step. An expression of fear and astonishment contorted his face. Dr Richard Borden.

'Oh God. Thank God. Oh God. Oh God.' He wept, his head sinking into his knees, weeping and crying uncontrollably.

His wrists and arms were torn and bloody from his savage attempts to free himself and he looked close to collapse. Sally knelt, put her hands on his shoulders and pressed with her fingers to make him look up at her. 'Listen to me. Is this thing armed?'

He nodded violently. 'Yes. Yes. It could go off any time.'

'How long?'

'They left about an hour ago. They've only got to drive to Hampstead . . . they could set it off . . .'

Sally stood and went to the metal cylinder. 'How do I deactivate it?' A skein of coloured wires emanated from three car batteries and entered a set of sockets in what seemed to be the end-cap of the thing. She grasped the wires. 'Do I just disconnect these?'

Borden screamed, 'No! Don't touch those.' He struggled to speak and the words came tumbling out over each other. 'If you pull those you'll create a spike in the power supply that will detonate the TNT. The only way . . . only way . . . is to unbolt the end-cap and remove the TNT charge.'

'How do I do that?'

'Take these off . . . let me do it . . .'

'We don't have time.'

'Then for God's sake hurry.'

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She looked from Borden to the bomb then knelt, took two kirby grips from her hair and pushed them into the lock of the handcuffs as she took his hand. Borden yelled in pain as the metal cuffs bit into the jagged gashes in his flesh. She was shocked to find her own hands shaking and unable to find the lock mechanism. She jabbed again and Borden sobbed in pain. She consciously stopped for a second and took a deep breath. Then she closed her eyes, felt her way inside the lock, visualising the mechanism, and felt the tumbler give way. She carefully removed the handcuffs and helped him to his feet, but he collapsed again, gasping.

‘I’m sorry,’ he said, clutching his damaged arms. ‘I can’t feel anything. I’m useless.’

‘No time, Doctor. What do I do?’

‘There’s an adjustable spanner on top of the cylinder, there. You must undo the twelve bolts holding the end cap in place. Quickly, please – quickly. They’ll be there by now.’

Sally grabbed the spanner and began undoing the bolts, each three inches long in the flange of a steel lid about the size of a manhole cover. She unscrewed opposite pairs to release the stresses in the lid equally, so it would not jam on the last few bolts.

As she was about to remove the last two bolts, Borden shouted, ‘Wait! Don’t take those out yet. The end cap is heavy – you’re going to have to support it on something and lift out the TNT. You’ll need both hands free. Pull one of those wooden crates over.’

She did as he instructed, using her right arm, lifted off the heavy steel lid and laid it with the utmost care on the crate. Inside the cylinder, the electrical leads on the other side were connected to the kind of detonators she had used in France except here they were embedded in a stack of TNT charges, instead of plastic explosive.

There was no obvious way of getting any purchase on the charges as the bricks of TNT were stacked to fill the cylinder tightly. The only other way was to pull on the electrical cables and that was too risky.

‘Are there any other tools here?’

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‘N . . n . .not as far as I know. They took the toolchests with them. You must hurry. . .’

Drops of sweat gathered at her eyes and she wiped them away with the back of her hand. She looked closely at the set up. The conventional explosive trigger was no different from bombs she had rigged herself many times. Beside the cylinder was a modified military field radio set, the output from which was connected to a set of telephone relays which in turn connected electrical power from the batteries to the detonators when the radio signal was received. The whole set-up was triplicated against failure of any one component. She thought of putting something between the contacts of the relays, but they were sealed units. Smashing the casings would probably trigger them.

‘Can I just switch off the field radio set?’

He shook his head violently. ‘S .s .same problem. Flicking the switch could create a spike in the power supply – it’ll register as the signal to detonate.’

‘Then I’m just going to have to pull each of the detonators out of the TNT by hand.’

Borden tried to get to his feet again but failed and collapsed onto the floor. ‘You’re mad. You’ll kill us both.’

His analysis was probably sound, but she was out of options and out of time. ‘Better close your eyes, Dr Borden.’

Six detonators. Purely electrical, no tremblers – as far as she could see. Just plastic tubes inside of which there would be a thin resistance wire coated in pyrotechnic material – a miniature electric fire waiting to be switched on and ignite the main charge. She wiped the sweat from her hands down her jumper and took the first one between her thumb and index finger. She twisted and pulled slowly and it came out with a slight popping sound. She laid it on the top of the crate and moved onto number two. Until all six were removed, the thing was still armed. She extracted the second and third successfully, Borden thrashing about wildly and sobbing loudly, ‘Oh God! Oh God!’.

She laid them carefully on the crate. ‘I’d appreciate it very much doctor, if you’d try to make less noise.’

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Her heart thumping, feeling breathless and dizzy, she gripped the end of number four.

It was embedded more deeply than the others and wouldn't move. She looked around for a pair of pliers but there was nothing. She dug her nails into the casing and felt them breaking. She twisted the fuse and it moved. Then she pulled slowly, keeping her nails dug as deeply as she could, and the plastic tube slowly came out of the TNT. Number five was the same. They had been embedded in the explosive so long it had dried out and set around them like plaster.

The last one would not move at all and she broke what was left of her nails trying to shift it. Still it would not budge. She grabbed the adjustable spanner, closed the jaws around the fuse end and screwed it as tight as she could with her fingertips. She tried turning it to loosen it, but the spanner simply slipped around the fuse casing. Sweat sheening her face, desperation crawling in her veins, she held the spanner like a hammer and tapped the fuse lightly on the end.

Borden hid his face in his hands. 'Oh God,' he moaned.

The fuse held tight. 'Hang on to your hat, Doctor.' She swung the spanner at the fuse as hard as she dared. It moved a good quarter of an inch the wrong way, into the TNT, but its grip was loosened. She grabbed it with her nails, wrenched it free, and fell back against the wooden crate, trembling and breathless.

'We did it,' she gasped.

'You did it,' said Borden. 'Oh God you saved us.'

She sat gasping air into her burning lungs for a few precious seconds, forced herself to her feet, put the detonators, radio and batteries onto the trolley and pushed them down the tunnel onto the dockside and over the edge into the moat, watching them sink to the bottom of the river. Even if by some miracle the set-up was triggered, the worst that could happen was half a dozen detonators exploding under twenty feet of water.

She searched around the top of the dock and found a set of metal steps in the wall that led up to the same level as the cobbled courtyard where the armoured car was marooned. She climbed up, one-handed, and yelled, 'It's all clear, Danny. Let Colonel Stanhope

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know the bomb's been disarmed.' She got an answering honk on the horn.

She went back down to the cellar, helped Borden stumble outside into the fresh air and sat him on the wall, massaging his wrists. She gave him a few moments to collect his wits, and herself a few to calm down. 'I think it's time you told me what the hell is going on.'

He shook his head. 'They lied to me. They promised me they would give the government a warning and issue an ultimatum but they've gone mad. They just want to kill people without any warning. I said I wanted nothing more to do with it, but they forced me to install the core at the point of a gun. Then they handcuffed me here.'

'You're known to them as "Felix"?'

He lowered his head, heavy with shame, and nodded. 'Yes. You have to understand, I thought what I was doing was for the best.'

'The best? Explain.'

'Teddy Buckingham recruited me in 1938. I thought he was an idealist like me and wanted to save lives by making war impossible. Do you know what he did in the war?'

'I know that story, yes. I've spoken with Teddy Buckingham. I know how persuasive he is.'

'That's the same reason I agreed to work on the Manhattan Project. I thought we were ending war. To make it fair on everyone I supplied all the information I learned to the Germans, too. I never thought anyone would be so mad as to use the bloody thing or mad enough to carry on fighting like the Japanese did. When I realised what we'd done I had a kind of . . . a kind of . . .'

'I understand. It happens to a lot of people.'

'I'm a Christian, you see, and I felt I'd deserted God, or maybe God had deserted me. Anyway, they kicked me off the atomic project and locked me away for a year in Broadmoor. They said it was because I'd lost my mind, but the real reason was they didn't want me talking to anyone about what I know.'

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‘I’m afraid I was very, very angry. I wanted to hit back. One day a car came for me and they told me I had been released into the care of Teddy Buckingham. He took me to his country house. It’s a very beautiful place. It kind of makes you want things. . .’

‘Oh, I know how enchanting it is.’

‘He introduced me to a man I’d met just before the war, a German general—’

‘Franz Kammler.’

‘That’s right. He said the Nazis had succeeded in enriching a quantity of uranium for weapons, which he had managed to hide in an underground factory somewhere in Silesia. They were only able to achieve about 65 to 75 per cent U235 – that’s the fissionable kind – so it wasn’t going to be weapons grade and it wouldn’t make a Hiroshima bomb. But it would still be equal to hundreds of tons of conventional explosives. Maybe a lot more.

‘Kammler said they had tested a prototype weapon in the forests of Thuringia in March 1944. It incinerated everything within a 600 yard radius and showered the surrounding area with dangerous levels of radioactivity. The core material he was able to smuggle through Holland into London by ship, together with the steel gun barrel and the other parts. I supervised the machining of it and the installation.

‘I was a bloody fool ever to trust either of them – but they told me they would present an ultimatum to Whitehall that the Duke of Windsor was to be invited back to the throne and the Attlee government was to abdicate in favour of a government of national unity, under Buckingham. They convinced me they meant it, but they were lying – they just wanted to murder everyone who stood in their way.’

‘Can you tell me where Buckingham and Kammler have gone? You said Hampstead?’

‘Buckingham has a house on Hampstead Heath overlooking the common. It’s nothing like his country retreat – just a big house. But you can see the whole of London from there. Just like when you and I were in New Mexico and saw . . . you know.’

‘Bastards.’

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‘Yes.’

‘They want a front row seat for their show.’

‘They’ve made the place impregnable. It’s like a concrete fortress. The perfect place from which to detonate the bomb.’

‘How exactly do they plan to do it?’

‘They have an electronic timing device just like the one used to set off the Trinity test. I’m afraid I supplied those details, too – although any competent physicist could design a similar set up.’

‘Do you have any idea when they planned to set it off?’

‘None at all. They were in a hurry to get going and kept pressuring me to finish my work. Then they left as soon as I’d screwed in the last bolt. No time was mentioned, but I think they plan to set it off as soon as possible – certainly today.’

‘I wonder what the hell they’ll do when they find their bomb doesn’t work?’

‘I imagine they’ll clear out and try again. Kammler has enough enriched uranium to make another core – another bomb. And he has access to millions of pounds. There are people behind him, I know that.’

Any time from now, they would discover the bomb had failed. When that happened they would most likely do as Borden suggested and clear out somewhere new – perhaps try again. She knew she couldn’t let them just walk away. Wouldn’t let them walk away.

‘I’m going to leave you with my friend Danny Jacobs. You’ve got him to thank for saving your life, but he’s badly wounded. He’s close to here in an armoured car. The parachute regiment is on its way here, but it’s going to take them more than an hour to get here. I’m going to ask you to look after my friend. Help him contact his regiment’s HQ. Will you do that for me?’

Borden nodded. ‘Where are you going? You’re wounded, bleeding.’

‘I’m going to pay a visit to Hampstead Heath.’

‘But you’ve done your part. It’s over.’

‘It’s not over for me. I’ve got some personal business to take care of.’

Thirty Nine

Sally lay in the long grass behind viburnum and rhododendron shrubs, looking towards the house, orientating herself. She was invisible in the darkness, thanks to the rainclouds that had gathered since sundown – not even a moon or starlight to give her away. Danny's Sten was across her back. Her left arm throbbed but she willed herself to ignore the pain.

Mac's research, which she had studied at the briefing, had included a sketch map of the house and grounds. She hadn't paid as much attention as she should at the time since the site appeared irrelevant but with hindsight it now seemed obvious this would be their ringside seat. She had gone over it in her mind enough times now to make sure she had fixed as much detail as possible.

The house ahead of her was relatively modern, a mock Tudor affair in the style of Edward Lutyens but without his flair and originality. The gardens were early Municipal with neatly regimented beds of uniform planting, chrysanthemums, dahlias and marigolds, poorly kept and wilting. For a man of such refined taste and sophistication as Teddy Buckingham, this must be nothing more than a workplace – perhaps merely rented.

The only cover between the perimeter shrubbery where she lay and the house itself was the skeleton of an old greenhouse, probably an Edwardian orangery of white-painted cast iron and many glass panes, now disused and derelict. Its windows had been whitewashed and taped during the Blitz: most were now broken.

She used the field glasses to scan the grounds and the windows of the house, but saw nothing. The windows were dark and the house gave the appearance of being unoccupied. It would take

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someone on guard roughly ten minutes to walk slowly around the outside. She waited 15 to be sure there was no such sentry, scanned the windows once more, ditched the glasses and walked quickly and smoothly across the lawn to the white glass house.

Looking through the broken panes she could see the ground within had run to grass and in the middle of the old cast iron structure was a massive brick and concrete building. Was this the 'fortress' Borden had told her about? She stepped through one of the orangery doors and quietly approached what appeared to be the entrance to the inner structure, protected by a thick blast wall. The heavy iron door beyond stood slightly ajar. She peered inside and saw it was merely an air raid shelter from the war, now disused and smelling of damp. The iron door was rusting at the hinges and its blue paint peeling.

She left the orangery by a door on the far side. There was still no activity outside or inside the house and she moved quickly across the lawn to the front corner of the manor. She had brought Danny's Sten and now held it cocked and ready. She decided to circle clockwise and started moving side-on around the house, her back to the wall.

The main front reception rooms were abandoned and deserted, paper peeling from the walls, bricks and rubble strewn over floors and carpets. She found the same with the rooms at the rear on this side – probably the dining room and study – both disused and in bad shape. This neglect and decay was worrying. Had she come to the wrong address? Had Buckingham and Kammler had already skipped?

As she neared the rear corner she became aware of a regular, low, thump–thump noise and then the distinctive smell of diesel exhaust. It was a muffled generator supplying electricity to the house through an armoured cable. The house was in use and they were taking no chances using the national grid supply – too easily cut off. Other pieces of heavy equipment – dumper trucks, a digger and a cement mixer – were drawn up, some covered over. Steel reinforcing rods were piled high. She was about to move past the equipment when a cigarette glowed momentarily in the darkness and

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she smelled the tobacco smoke. Someone was sitting in the driving seat of the dumper truck.

She crawled forward on her belly and saw it was the bad taste horse trainer. He had a machine pistol across his knees and his hands in the pockets of his jacket, a cigarette hanging from his lips. She considered bypassing him in the dark but that was bad tactics. A live enemy in your rear is unpredictable and an unnecessary risk. She silently got behind him in the darkness and waited patiently. Sooner or later, he would drop the cigarette end on the floor of the cab and tread on it. As he did so, he would instinctively look down and his attention would be momentarily diverted.

Finally he dropped the cigarette end but – instead of looking down – held his head back high and blew the last plume of smoke to the sky. She used an arm lock and squeezed rather than snapped his neck. She braced herself for his retaliation and it came in the form of repeated jabs of his elbow into her ribs. One gave with a crack but she hung on. Her left arm was rapidly losing all strength but she increased the pressure with her right and clenched her teeth. He lost consciousness in less than a minute clawing wildly at her arms, hair and face, but she held on for another sixty seconds to make sure. *That was for you, Alain.*

She did a quick count. One at Ivinghoe Abbey, two more at the Tower and one here. Four in all. That left Buckingham, Kammler and possible one or two more. That was manageable. She was under no illusions about how it was going to end. Kammler and Buckingham had nowhere to go – they would fight like cornered rats. Any men still left with them were already walking dead and they knew it. It was going to be a straight fire fight – the situation where she was at her coolest. But she also wanted to get Buckingham on his own, preferably still alive. She wanted to hear his answers.

A quick survey of the rear of the house confirmed Richard Borden's description. Extensive reinforced concrete building work had transformed the back of the place into some kind of stronghold. The only external feature was what looked like a VHF wireless

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aerial on the high flat roof. There was no entry or exit from the outside. She would have to get inside the house.

Something about the guard she had just neutralised bothered her, but she couldn't put her finger on it. She returned to the lifeless body and quickly searched his pockets. She found nothing except cigarettes, a lighter and his bunch of keys. She took them as potentially useful but remained somehow puzzled. What exactly was he doing here? Guarding a strongroom to which there was no entrance or exit? It didn't make much sense.

She continued her clockwise circuit and came to windows to the rooms on the other side of the house. Slits of electric light lanced through drawn curtains from a main room of some kind and fell on the overgrown lawn. She got down and tried to see through the slits, but could see nothing but a narrow slice of the back of Buckingham's tweed jacket. He was talking to someone. She ducked down and continued her circuit back to the beginning.

Although they had gone to such trouble at the rear of the house, oddly the front door had no special security measures, just the Yale tumbler lock, and an ordinary mortise lock. She let herself in quietly with the keys and set the catch to leave the lock in the open position.

She gave herself a moment's pause to accustom her eyes to the layout and then moved quietly through the house towards the room with the light, Sten at the ready, placing her feet to avoid the debris. The two voices she heard arguing were familiar. It was Buckingham and Kammler, talking in German.

'Can't you get it through your thick Germanic skull that unless we go through with it *exactly* as we planned, we will have gained nothing at all. The whole point is to deliver the ultimatum. Then we will get the King back, get control of the government and get rid of these bloody Communists –'

Kammler's voice held undisguised contempt. 'Not as *we* planned, Herr Herzog – as *you* planned. That is your political pipedream. The Fuhrer never dealt in such fantasies – it was always cold, hard fact with him.'

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‘Hitler is dead, Kammler. He is the past. Nothing you do can bring him back. We are the future now.’

‘Hitler may be dead but his plans are not. He ordered me personally to destroy London and that is what I am going to do tonight. You and your kind are finished anyway, whatever happens.’

Sally moved closer down the corridor to the door to the room. Through the crack of the hinge she could see Buckingham was standing with his hands tied or handcuffed behind him while Kammler confronted him, a machine pistol loosely slung over his shoulder.

Kammler spat the words, ‘I care nothing for your idiotic aristocracy. All I care about is that the Fuhrer did not die for nothing. And that England should pay in blood for the one million Germans killed by your bombers.’

He abruptly turned on his heel and Sally instinctively stepped back into the shadows, ready to attack from behind, but instead of exiting into the corridor where she stood, Kammler walked towards the rear of the house, to a door she could not see.

She stepped into the room and held up a warning hand to silence Buckingham. his face was already haggard and white with fear but he assumed an even more shocked expression when he saw her and took in the impossible fact that it was Sally. She moved close to him, looked behind and saw he was handcuffed to a ringbolt fixed to the wall.

At the front of the room – it looked to have been the old dining room – a massive reinforced concrete wall had been built. In the middle was a heavy steel door with a small observation window.

Sally edged forward, flattened herself against the blast wall, and peered through the observation window in the metal door. The armoured glass was so thick it distorted everything with wavy lines like seeing underwater.

The newly-built bunker was a large workshop or laboratory. Half the equipment in there was a mystery to her but she had seen some of it before – at Los Alamos. There were benches, chemical glassware and reagents on one side and along the other machine tools enclosed in transparent housings or Perspex or something

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similar. There were extractor fans above the surface grinders and precision machines to collect and recycle uranium cuttings and powder no matter how small.

In the centre of the room was a control desk with some electrical apparatus with lamps and switches Sally guessed must be the automatic detonator described by Borden. A skein of electrical cables rose from the desk and disappeared into the ceiling, she assumed to the VHF radio aerial she had seen from outside.

Kammler was standing at the central desk, closing switches and staring intently at the chronometer in front of him. A light began to flash and it looked like he had initiated the countdown mechanism.

Sally turned back to Buckingham who seemed to be close to tears. ‘Can’t you do something?’ He begged. ‘Can’t you stop him?’

‘Whatever he’s doing in there, Kammler has missed the bus. His countdown machine isn’t going to do anything. I’ve disarmed your bomb.’

‘*You?* But how could you . . .?’

‘I had help from Dr Borden. It was a mistake for Kammler to leave him there.’

‘I wouldn’t let Kammler just shoot him in cold blood.’

‘How long is the countdown?’

‘Fifteen minutes. He’ll stay in that bunker until he thinks the bomb has gone off – Just in case we’re in range here after all.’

‘He’s going to be disappointed.’

Buckingham shook his head desperately. ‘Then there’s no telling what he might do.’

‘What can he do? It’s over.’

‘He’s got another core of uranium in the safe in there – his insurance policy, he called it. He could try to get away with it and create another bomb somehow. The core alone . . .’

Sally was beginning to relax. ‘That’s not our problem any more. The army is on their way here now. They’ll have to deal with it.’

‘Then there’s that policeman . . .’

Sally froze. ‘What policeman?’

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‘His name’s Mackenzie. That’s the name on his warrant card. Kammler’s men found him trying to break into Ivinghoe Abbey last night. They’ve been beating hell out of him – trying to make him talk. But he wouldn’t say anything.’

‘Where have they got him now?’

Buckingham nodded towards the control room. ‘Kammler’s got him in there.’

An unseen fist grabbed at Sally’s insides as her guts knotted themselves again. It wasn’t over after all. ‘How can I get Kammler to come out here?’

Teddy shook his head. ‘Nothing will get him out here now. He’s totally single minded. As far as he’s concerned he’s carrying out his Fuhrer’s orders to destroy London.’

The puzzle of the guard outside explained itself. She abruptly left and sprinted down the corridor, outside and to the back of the house. She heaved the muffling blankets from the diesel generator, a Caterpillar, and its steady thump, thump became twice as loud. She scrambled through the bunch of keys that she’d taken from the guard and found one marked with insulating tape that clearly was not a door key. She searched the generator and found a red emergency stop button, inserted the key, turned it anti clockwise and held down the red button. The generator coughed to a halt and was silent. The lamp on the machine glowed brightly and then slowly died.

She ran back into the house to the room where Buckingham stood. The main lights in the control room were now extinguished and the room was lit only by the eerie orange glow of some emergency lanterns. The countdown mechanism had stopped and Kammler was standing in front of the control desk frantically trying to restore life to it by repeatedly flicking switches.

Sally stood in front of the steel door, hammered on the window with the butt of her Sten and held up the bunch of keys. Kammler turned, saw her, saw the keys, his face a mask of hatred and fury as understanding dawned.

He snatched the machine pistol, lunged to the corner of the room, grabbing something out of her field of vision and then pointed

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the muzzle of his weapon at her through the window in warning. He motioned her to move away. The strong room door swung open and Kammler emerged, half-dragging Mac on his knees, holding him by his coat collar, pointing the machine pistol in his right hand at Mac's head. Mac's face was a mass of blood and bruises, one eye completely closed up, his shirt front soaked in congealed blood. He looked only half conscious, but he managed to shake his head weakly at Sally to indicate he had revealed nothing.

Kammler barked, 'Drop your weapon if you wish him to live.'

Sally dropped her Sten on the ground and half raised her arms.

Kammler barked, 'Who are you, girl? What are you?'

Sally ignored Kammler. She said, conversationally, 'What do I do, Mac?'

Mac looked at her through his one good eye and gasped, 'Whatever London tells you to do, Blondie.'

Sally spoke to Kammler, 'Where is the uranium core?'

Kammler sneered at her, 'I do not answer questions from young girls. I am an SS General of the Third Reich.' His angry reply deflected his attention for a fraction of a second.

'And I'm a British officer.' In a single fluid movement she reached for the Mauser from the waistband at her back and shot from the hip, aiming by instinct. The bullet hit Kammler in the shoulder, knocked him backwards a foot or so, and shocked him so much he let go of Mac's coat collar and dropped his weapon.

Sally raised the gun and tried to get off a second shot, aimed with both hands this time, but Kammler stepped quickly back through the security door into the bunker and slammed it behind him. The bullet bounced with a crack off the metal and embedded itself in the wall. Through the inspection window she saw him run to the green metal safe at the far wall and work the brass handles to open it. She fired twice more at the glass window but it didn't even crack.

Kammler opened the safe door, blood pouring from his shoulder wound and his face screwed up in pain, took out a silver

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metal spike a foot tall and struggled to place it on the desk, his hands slippery with his own blood. He then went back to the safe and from a separate compartment struggled to lift a silver cylinder with both hands.

Buckingham screamed, 'For God's sake get out of here. He's going to assemble the core. It'll go critical – he'll blow this place sky high.'

Sally went to Mac and half lifted, him. She stumbled and Mac slipped back to the floor. She snatched up Kammler's machine pistol from the floor and loosed a whole clip into the ring bolt until Buckingham's handcuffs came free. She barked, 'Take his other arm.' Buckingham obeyed.

Together they half carried, half dragged Mac down the debris-strewn corridor to the front door, and scrambled across the lawn towards the perimeter wall. Behind them Sally felt, rather than saw, a searing inferno coming towards them down the corridor.

'The greenhouse.' She screamed. They dragged Mac through the doors, to the bomb shelter and threw both Mac bodily through the narrow entrance. Sally felt herself being pushed after him by Buckingham who was attempting to close the metal door. As he did so, the garden was momentarily lit by a flash of blue lightning as the burst of ionising radiation ripped over their heads and all around the brick shelter.

Through a metal air brick high on the shelter wall, Sally saw the house disappear in a ball of violet flame as the door into hell opened up. Where the bunker had stood was still marked in the inferno by the stunted remains of feet thick walls but nothing else remained visible – brick, slate, wood, plaster had all vapourised in a few seconds of searing heat.

The fireball began to die away. She said, 'Give it another couple of minutes and it might be safe enough to make a run for the wall.'

Buckingham shook his head, 'Too late for me, I'm afraid.' He held up a plastic badge containing a piece of 35mm photographic film. The film was black. 'If you hang around this stuff long enough, it kills you without you even knowing. You two had better clear out

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before this place becomes too hot for you. There's still time for you.'

'The army will be here soon,' she said. 'There may be something they can do . . .' They lapsed into silence: both knew how it would end now.

They sat in silence on the concrete floor, exhausted, backs leaning against the wall, Sally trying to pull together enough strength to get away from the radioactive wreckage that used to be a manor house. She gasped in the stale air of the shelter.

Buckingham lifted his head. 'What are you? MI5? Special Branch?'

The simple truth. She owed him that much. 'Neither. I was with SOE in the war. Now I'm here for my own reasons. I think you know what they are.'

'I thought it was almost certainly beyond accidental that a woman of your quality should materialise just at this moment – you were too good to be true.'

'I believed the same about you. I'm still not sure what I think.'

'I've said and done a lot of stupid things in my life but I meant what I said about trying to change the way people live. Women. Working people. Real people. I thought it could be done with the threat of Armageddon. The triumph of the will. I was wrong. There will always be Kammlers who are mad or just want to destroy and kill . . .'

'You opened the door for him. It's no good blaming someone else.'

Buckingham shook his head but had no reply. He said, 'I was right about one thing. You and I are the same. We're both outsiders, both creatures of destiny. I'm right, aren't I?'

Sally turned her head, 'That sounds like the army arriving. I've got to get him out of here.'

Teddy said, 'Of course you must. Get going.' He looked up at her with pleading eyes. 'I'm finished anyway. Can you give me another way out?'

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Sally pulled the Mauser from her waistband, checked the magazine. There was a single bullet left. She handed him the pistol. 'This is yours.'

He was having trouble getting his breath. He took the weapon. 'I always thought . . . this would come in useful . . . one day. I didn't expect . . . it to be like this.'

As Sally hoisted the semi-conscious Mac to his feet, Buckingham said, 'You could . . . have been somebody, Sally. We could have . . . achieved great things together.'

'I already am somebody, and I've saved some lives today. That's enough for me.'

As she helped Mac stagger out of the orangery, leaning heavily on her, powerful headlights cut through the night outside the perimeter wall and probed the grounds. The searchlight from an armoured personnel carrier lit up the ornamental iron gates at the entrance to the drive and in the glare soldiers were using bolt cutters to shear through the chains that sealed them.

As Sally arrived at the gates, willing hands came out of the dazzle of searchlight beams to take Mac towards a waiting ambulance. Peter Stanhope shrugged off his military greatcoat and placed it around her shoulders. He said, 'Thank God you're safe.'

She smiled at him. As she did so they heard the sound of a single gunshot echoing from the grounds and both looked up.

'What the hell was that?' Stanhope reached for his service revolver.

'It was a German bullet,' Sally said. 'But you can put your gun away, Colonel. That was the last one. The war's over.'

Historical note

Some twenty British scientists were part of the Manhattan Project team from 1943 to 1946 and it was a British scientific innovation – using shaped explosive charges to compress the plutonium core – that made the Trinity bomb feasible. British Security Co-ordination, based in New York, was the outstation of the Secret Intelligence Service in the U.S., renamed to avoid any suggestion Britain was spying on its ally.

The plutonium core of the first atomic bomb was carried, in its special metal container, (happily, without accident) by distinguished physicist Philip Morrison by car to the test site. On Thursday, 12 July 1945, he checked out the plutonium core for the bomb from the vault at Los Alamos and was driven to the test site in a Plymouth sedan staff car by a Women's Army Corps driver and an armed escort. They drove to the old one-story Macdonald ranch house where the core was loaded into a plug-like device designed to fit inside the bomb. Next morning the core was driven to the Trinity test site in the desert named *Jornada del Muerto* – Day of the Dead – later re-named White Sands for PR purposes. Plutonium is roughly equivalent to a nerve gas in toxicity, so Sally was wise to put on gloves to handle the core, although in reality it had been silver plated for easier handling. Nevertheless Philip Morrison wisely wore surgical gloves.

In 1942, the Special Operations Executive – formed to carry out sabotage in occupied Europe – began to recruit women agents for the first time. Some 40 exceptionally brave and talented women volunteered for the extremely hazardous duty of parachuting at night into occupied France and helping organise resistance to the Nazi occupation. Many were captured and at least a dozen died.

The recruitment of women into SOE represents the first time in British history that women were trained in weapons, explosives

and combat and sent into battle. One might think this was an important breakthrough in equality of treatment – except for the true reason women were recruited. The average German was so contemptuous of women and so prejudiced against females, that Nazi soldiers found it impossible to believe a young woman on the streets of France could be a trained soldier and represent any threat. The Germans' own misogyny was used against them.

There was opposition from the Air Ministry to the use of RAF aircraft to transport SOE agents. Air Chief Marshall Charles Portal wrote, 'I think you will agree that there is a vast difference in ethics between the time honoured operation of dropping a spy from the air, and this entirely new scheme for dropping what one can only call assassins.'

Sally would, I think, be shocked to hear herself described as an assassin, yet it is difficult to deny that this is the purpose for which the women were trained. Perhaps this is one of those occasions when one must appeal to the essential difference in outlook between the Nazis, who killed without scruple, and the Allies who fought to right a great wrong.

After the defeat of Germany in May 1945, SOE's role in Europe became redundant, so it is possible that an agent like Sally might have been assigned to British Security Coordination in the US where British scientists were working on the atomic bomb. Just eight months later, in January 1946, after the defeat of the Japanese, the newly elected Prime Minister, Clement Attlee, was briefed on the existence of the Special Operations Executive and insisted the whole organisation be closed down in 48 hours. Some two hundred and eighty SOE agents were taken into the 'Special Operations Branch' of the Secret Intelligence Service but all of them were men. As far as I can determine, none of the brave women of SOE was kept on. One exception was an administrator, Vera Atkins, who had been mainly responsible for sending agents into the field. She was given permission to comb through allied-occupied Germany to establish the fate of the missing agents. As soon as the war was over, women who had risked their lives in battle were demobilised and sent back to their pre-war occupations as teachers, sales girls or secretaries.

‘Ultra’ intelligence, gathered from German radio signals by codebreakers at Bletchley Park, contributed materially to defeating the Nazis. When WW2 ended, a cover story was constructed that, on direct orders from Winston Churchill, the signals intelligence unit at Bletchley Park had been disbanded, that the prototype computers developed there were destroyed and that all files had been burned. In reality, the Germans were not the only nations using Enigma cypher machines. The same coding system was also being used for secret communication by Sweden, the Netherlands, Spain, Poland, Turkey, Switzerland and others. The British government saw a priceless opportunity of eavesdropping on the diplomatic traffic of other countries – whether friendly or unfriendly – and so the work of Bletchley Park was continued at Cheltenham and elsewhere. The ‘Colossus’ machines built by T. H. Flowers of the Post Office Research unit at Dollis Hill were transferred elsewhere to continue decrypting radio intercepts, and so the fiction of Bletchley being disbanded was considered a necessary deception – the big secret had to be kept up for some years longer, even from many agents of the intelligence services, like Sally.

The Communist Party in Britain, and the British Union of Fascists, were both penetrated in the 1930s by women MI5 agents run by one of the most remarkable spymasters of the twentieth century, Maxwell Knight. Knight spent 30 years with MI5, recruiting, training and running a long list of agents. He ran department B5(b), responsible for counter intelligence – finding and neutralising other people’s spies. He believed women agents could be more effective than men in some situations because they were likely to fit in and be trusted more easily – very similar to the reason the Special Operations Executive began recruiting women agents in 1942.

Knight’s agents infiltrated numerous political organisations, most notably Olga Gray, who penetrated the Communist Party of Great Britain and the beautiful and resourceful Joan Miller, who together with Marjorie Amos and Helen de Munck, infiltrated Fascist circles and were instrumental in unmasking two spies in a sensational trial, Anna Wolkoff and Tyler Kent.

As well as being a successful spymaster, Knight was an eccentric jazz musician and naturalist. He ran MI5's counter-espionage department, not from its wartime HQ at Leconfield House, in Curzon Street, Mayfair, but from his flat in Dolphin Square, which he shared with a menagerie that included a parrot, a baboon and a bear cub.

Fascism flourished in pre-war Britain as in many other European countries. At the grass roots level there was the British Union of Fascists, led by former Labour cabinet minister Sir Oswald Mosley. It became the fastest-growing political party in Britain in the 1930s, claiming to have some 50,000 members at its peak, but was proscribed by the government in 1940 and its leaders interned because of possible Nazi sympathies. Mosley and his wife lived in a cottage in the grounds of Holloway women's prison until their release in 1943.

The BUF was a largely working class party. At the opposite end of the social scale was King Edward VIII, known after his abdication in 1936 as Duke of Windsor, who visited Hitler, greeted the dictator with the Nazi salute, and who believed Britain should sign a peace agreement with Germany. He really was reported by the FBI as saying , 'After the war is over and Hitler will crush the Americans . . . we'll take over. They don't want me as their King, but I'll be back as their leader.'

In 1936 the government was so alarmed at King Edward VIII's romance with Wallis Simpson, and their Nazi connections, that Home Secretary Sir John Simon ordered the GPO to tap his phone calls to and from both Buckingham Palace and his home at Fort Belvedere in Windsor, which he retained until 1940. As far as I know, no transcripts have ever been made public.

The Duke of Windsor was far from alone in his political views in the 1930s. Many – perhaps most – of Britain's aristocrats believed an accommodation with Hitler was the best way for them to continue to enjoy their privileges and for Britain to continue to govern its empire. The alternative, they feared, was communism, thinly disguised with a veneer of democracy, and eventual domination by the Soviet Union.

In 1940, many believed that had Lord Halifax succeeded Neville Chamberlain as prime minister he would have signed such a peace treaty. Initially, Churchill was in a minority in wanting to continue the fight. When Hitler's Deputy, Rudolph Hess flew to Scotland in 1941, it was in the serious, but misguided, expectation of meeting the Duke of Hamilton to discuss peace terms.

This movement to appease and perhaps even join with Hitler found its expression in a number of clubs and societies, many secretly funded by the Nazis. The most prominent society was the Anglo-German Link founded by Barry Domville, and the Right Club, formed by Captain Archibald Ramsay.

The Nordic League was established in 1935, with the assistance of secret agents from Nazi Germany, sent over for the purpose. Initially, the organisation was known as the White Knights of Britain – a title that managed to combine both racist and anti-Soviet overtones since White was the epithet widely adopted by the members of the Russian ruling class who survived the revolution of 1917 and subsequently opposed Communism. It attracted many prominent members including Archibald Ramsay, the Conservative MP for Peebles and a deeply religious man, who became its first leader. In May 1939, Ramsay formed another organisation, which he named the Right Club. His aim was to unify all the different right-wing groups in Britain, or as Ramsay put it 'co-ordinating the work of all the patriotic societies'. Ramsay recorded the names of his Club's membership in a so-called Red Book – a roll call of many in the British establishment and aristocracy of the period, including the Duke of Westminster, Baron Redesdale, Lord Sempill, Lord Ronald Graham, Lord Carnegie, the Earl of Galloway, Princess Blucher, and Sir Alexander Walker. The Right Club also forged links with other like-minded pro-fascist organisations, such as the Anglo-German Fellowship, founded by Admiral Sir Barry Domville, a former Director of Naval Intelligence, and Oswald Mosley's British Union of Fascists.

Belief in the occult and in psychic phenomena was common in the 1920s and 1930s, having been given a massive boost by the carnage of the First World War and the desire of people to contact their loved ones of the lost generation. Perhaps oddly, there seems to

have been a crossover between the occult, right wing politics, and the intelligence world. For example, notorious occultist and magician Aleister Crowley, ('Ordinary morality is only for ordinary people') was secretly an agent of MI5. Maxwell Knight and his friend thriller writer Denis Wheatley were occult pupils of Crowley. Some facts are too bizarre even for fiction.

The Nazi party in its original form was called the Thule Society and involved occult beliefs and esoteric theories about the origin of the earth and humankind. Himmler was a deeply superstitious man who employed a personal astrologer and imbued the SS with symbols and mysteries of the occult, including the runic symbols and theories of Guido List (who, like Joachim Ribbentrop, inserted a fake 'von' into his name to sound aristocratic.)

Just ten days after the first atomic bomb was tested in July 1945, Britain elected a new Labour government, under Prime Minister Clement Atlee. The existence of weapons of mass destruction posed the new government with a terrifying problem. Atlee created a secret Whitehall commission with the innocuous sounding title of the *Imports Research Committee*. The Committee included senior officials from the Ministry of Defence, Directorate of Scientific Intelligence and the Security Service.

The bland title concealed a serious fear. At this time Britain imported 70 per cent of its food, and an equally high proportion of raw materials, from overseas. This meant some 20 million tons of cargo arrived at British ports each year, especially London's docks.

The Committee had to answer the horrifying question: how easy would it be for a hostile power or terrorists to smuggle an atomic bomb into a British port in the hold of a ship, concealed among this mass of imports?

The answer they gave was as frightening as the question. 'There are no practicable . . . steps that can be taken in peace time to prepare against any of these threats.' The best they could do was to suggest 'a display of confident assurance on our part that we have an adequate answer to the threat.'

This vulnerability to a sneak attack continued to worry the government to such an extent that in October 1952, when Britain tested its first independent atomic weapon in the Pacific, the bomb

was detonated in the hull of a cargo ship, in shallow water near the shore, to replicate the effects of exploding it in a harbour. The effects were every bit as devastating as expected.

This very real fear is the explanation for the reluctance of post-war governments to provide cash to rebuild the old central London docks. They had been largely destroyed in the Blitz as the Luftwaffe sought to bring Britain to its knees. Instead, ministers preferred to back containerisation of goods and new container ports, well away from London such as at Felixstowe and Tilbury. This policy was maintained even though it increased transport costs and road traffic.

But if an atomic attack, even on a crude scale, were remotely feasible, what enemy power or terrorist group could possibly have the scientific resources to make even an improvised atomic bomb in 1946?

The nightmare that the Nazis might succeed in building an atomic bomb dominated the minds of the British and US governments in the later stages of the war. When the first V2 rockets exploded without warning in London in 1944, anxious scientists arrived quickly at the detonation sites with Geiger counters to see if the warheads contained radioactive material. At the Normandy landings on D-Day, anti-radioactivity squads stood by in case the Nazis attacked with novel weapons.

Concern was so high that the American *Alsos* scientific mission followed invading allied troops into occupied Germany, sniffing out evidence of nuclear development, and following the slimmest clue. In the captured western zone *Alsos* found a prototype reactor using graphite and heavy water together with uranium cubes – but no weapons. The mission reported that Germany lagged behind and fears of a Nazi atom bomb were groundless. The Allies relaxed.

But the Americans and British were not the only people scouring Germany for evidence of atomic development. Joseph Stalin demanded his army commander in chief, Marshall Zhukov, investigate in the captured eastern zone and report back. The Zhukov report, recently released from former Soviet archives, tells a different story.

In November 1944 an agent of Soviet military intelligence, the GRU, reported German preparations to test a new bomb of enormous destructive capacity in Thuringia. The agent included technical details and drawings and reported the bomb was one and a half metres in diameter and consisted of interconnected hollow spheres. In general aspect the device described bears some resemblance to the Trinity bomb. Professor Vladimir Sacharow, a military historian at the University of Moscow says a second GRU report, from 23 March 1945, spoke of an enormous test explosion in Thuringia that incinerated everything inside a 600 yard radius, leaving radioactive traces.

Based on these and other reports, the Zhukov Report to Stalin reached a very different conclusion from the *Alsos* team. It said that, 'The Germans achieved good results in the theoretical and practical research into the application of atomic energy which resulted in the construction of an atomic bomb.'

The Germans are known to have imported 1,000 tons of uranium through Belgium, from the Belgian Congo, and it is sometimes thought the need to import uranium was what hampered Nazi scientists. But as Vladimir Sacharow points out, the Joint German-Soviet mining company Wismut extracted uranium from Saxony and Thuringia between 1946 and 1990 that was the basis for the entire Soviet nuclear programme and was the third largest producer of uranium in the world.

The research reactor *Alsos* discovered was hidden in the cellar of an ancient castle in the small town of Haigerloch. It had been dispersed away from cities likely to be subject to air attack, by the SS, who were in charge of all secret weapon development by 1944. From recent research, it now seems clear the SS dispersed more than one nuclear research facility in this way, some to purpose built underground laboratories, others to more obvious places.

Kummersdorf, near Berlin, was the home of German rocket and secret weapon development since the early 1930s. It became the Army weapons testing range. *Alsos* discovered an experimental nuclear reactor here that had been destroyed, possibly in a nuclear accident.

More significantly, in September 1943 work was begun on Projekt Riese, or Giant, which involved the construction of a number of massive underground complexes in the Sowie Mountains of Lower Silesia, with some kind of special facilities. The project was originally under the control of Reichsminister Albert Speer but, by April 1944, Hitler was so frustrated at the slow progress he handed the project over to the SS and to General Hans Kammler to complete. The work was on a huge scale with thousands of metres of tunnels and work areas. Construction took so many people Kammler built a concentration camp next door to house them. The man put in charge scientifically was Professor Walther Gerlach, who was a nuclear physicist and the man responsible for Germany's atomic weapons programme. And from the few documents of the project, we know it was classified as "Kriegsentscheidend" – Decisive for the outcome of the war – the highest classification for secrecy and funding priority in Nazi Germany.

Did the *Alsos* team look hard enough? And did they look in the right places? Or were they too easily satisfied? And was the Zhukov report correct in saying there was a German atomic bomb?

In the west, the accepted story of German nuclear development in World War II goes something like this. Hitler didn't even come close to developing an atomic bomb. Germany lost many of its brilliant scientists because they were Jewish and fled to Britain or America. Those German scientists who remained were way behind their counterparts in Britain and the U.S. and were in any case half-hearted about working on a bomb for Hitler. They lacked the industrial muscle to separate Uranium 235 (weapons grade material) on an industrial scale, like the Manhattan project, and didn't even manage to build a working nuclear reactor.

This is in some ways a comforting narrative – one that is much easier to deal with than trying to envisage London or New York after a nuclear explosion, and Britain and the U.S. on their knees begging Hitler for mercy. But how accurate is it?

Many German Jewish scientists did seek refuge in Britain and America. But the scientists that stayed behind were first rate minds and included those who had made the initial discoveries about nuclear fission. Indeed, in its infancy, nuclear energy was very much

a German science. Nuclear fission was discovered in April 1939 by Otto Hahn and his assistant Fritz Strassman. Both continued to work at the Kaiser Wilhelm Institute throughout the war on nuclear chemistry, though neither worked specifically on a nuclear weapon. Werner Heisenberg, Germany's most illustrious physicist was appointed by the Wehrmacht to run the Kaiser Wilhelm Institute, which they took over, and led nuclear research.

The idea that many German scientists were covertly anti-Nazi is a discovery that they made after the war when they were in Allied hands. For example, In 1941, with Germany master of all western Europe, Heisenberg told Nils Bohr (a Dane) 'How important it was that Germany should win the war . . . the occupation of Denmark, Norway, Belgium and Holland was a sad thing but as regards the countries in eastern Europe it was a good development because these countries were not able to govern themselves.'

Clearly, some German scientists saw the highest good of Europe in a German victory and German hegemony.

Heisenberg told a conference of the Reich research Council as early as February 1942, 'If one could assemble a lump of uranium-235 large enough for the escape of neutrons from its surface to be small compared with the internal neutron multiplication, then the numbers of neutrons would multiply enormously in a very short space of time, and the whole uranium fission energy, of 15 million-million calories per ton, would be liberated in a fraction of a second. Pure uranium-235 is thus seen to be an explosive of quite unimaginable force.'

Conscious of this potential, in the first months of the war, German scientist voluntarily got together to form the *Uranverein* – the 'Uranium Club' – and set out to explore whether nuclear fission could be used either for energy in a reactor, or in a weapon, or both. At this stage, it would have been perfectly possible for Germany to acquire a bomb first. America was only galvanised into action by the report from Nobel laureate Arthur Compton who estimated that, with access to a uranium-heavy water reactor running at 100,000 kilowatts for two months, the Germans could have enough plutonium for six atomic bombs by the end of 1942.

In 1940, the Nazis began building a new laboratory for nuclear research next door to the Institute for Physics in Berlin. It was named the *Virus House* to discourage attention. Other research teams were experimenting elsewhere in Germany including the University of Leipzig. The *Uranverein* physicists had access to thousands of tons of refined uranium and to substantial quantities of heavy water from Norway. They were building their first cyclotron in Joliot-Curie's captured laboratory in Paris. And they had many of their greatest physicists and chemists working on the problem of U-235 separation.

In June 1942, Werner Heisenberg and Robert Dopel built a uranium-heavy water reactor in the laboratory in Leipzig and succeeded in demonstrating a sustained fission reaction – the first scientists in the world to do so. They also demonstrated the world's first nuclear disaster because after 20 hours of continuous operation, the reactor exploded, destroying the laboratory, the scientists fleeing from the building just in time to save their lives.

Would Hitler have used an atomic bomb had he possessed it? Albert Speer had no doubt. In his autobiography *Inside the Third Reich*, he wrote 'I am sure that Hitler would not have hesitated for a moment to employ atom bombs against England.'

It's sometimes thought no-one in the Nazi hierarchy saw the possibilities of an atomic bomb or that no-one wished to pursue such a high risk project. There is some truth in this to the extent that Hitler and his closest officials placed their greatest hopes in the V-1 flying bomb and V-2 rocket, which very nearly succeeded both in compelling Britain to sue for peace and denying Allied forces an invasion platform.

But this view overlooks entirely the role played by Himmler and his SS. Himmler used the war slowly to gain control over all German armaments and secret weapons programmes. The man he chose for the task was SS General Dr Hans Kammler, the man who designed the Auschwitz gas chambers and other concentration camps. Angry at the delays in producing the V-2 rocket, Hitler demanded that a single strong person should be put in charge, and appointed Kammler to control both production and deployment of

the V-2. By the war's end he also controlled the production of the Messerschmitt Me 262 jet aircraft and other weapons.

Kammler was last seen in May 1945 as the Third Reich crumbled, and the following month his widow petitioned to have him declared dead. She provided a statement by Kammler's driver, Kurt Preuk, in which he said he had seen the corpse of Kammler and been present at his burial. He was said to have taken cyanide.

A number of people have raised the suspicion that Kammler did not die in 1945. Donald W. Richardson a former special agent of the U.S. Office of Strategic Services who hunted atomic scientists in Germany in 1945, claimed to be 'the man who brought Kammler to the US'. Shortly before he died, Richardson reportedly told his sons about his experience during and after the war, including *Operation Paperclip* in which Nazi scientists were secretly given new identities in the US. According to them, Richardson claimed to have supervised Kammler until 1947.

Perhaps of greatest significance is that it was general Kammler who was responsible for firing around 2,300 V-2 rockets including more than 500 at London. If any one man was directly responsible for the attempt to use secret weapons to destroy London and break Londoners' will to resist, it is Kammler.

What if the Leipzig reactor hadn't exploded but continued in operation? What if other similar reactors were built – at Kammersdorf or in the Sowie mountains – and Uranium-235 or Plutonium became available in Germany? What if Kammler really did survive and what if he had decided to fulfil the mission given him personally by Hitler and Himmler? These are some of the questions I've tried to answer in fiction.

What would happen in real life if someone was foolish enough to bring together two lumps of weapons grade uranium on a lab bench? The two halves would form a critical mass and release a burst of energy in the form of heat and radiation. However because the fissionable material is not compressed as in a bomb casing, it would immediately melt or be blown apart, so the critical reaction would stop before developing to a full nuclear explosion. The initial burst would certainly destroy a lab or house and anyone caught in

the blast would receive a lethal dose of radiation. But anyone behind a thick blast wall would be safe.

There is, of course, no Duke of Buckingham and hasn't been since 1889, although it's worth noting that one of the first holders of this title, was attainted for treason in 1483 and his son executed for treason in 1521. There is no Ivinghoe Abbey and no *hereditary* Constable of the Tower of London, though there is such a ceremonial title that has been occupied down the years by many patriotic and no doubt blameless individuals.

I hope I will be excused if I have granted myself the novelists' privilege of adding a little embroidery to the historical facts of this story in order to entertain.

When Sally Comes Marching Home is, of course, a work of fiction. But it is a story woven from historical fact about a period in history when the fiction came uncomfortably close to being true.

Acknowledgements

When a book is published it's the author's name that appears on the cover. Yet many others are involved in what is really a collaborative process. The following are just some of the many people who have helped me write this book.

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If you've enjoyed reading When Sally comes marching home, I would appreciate it very much if you'd go to Amazon.com (in the United States) or Amazon.co.uk (in the United Kingdom) and write a review. And feel free to contact me at www.richardmilton.net

*As an introduction to my other thrillers, I'm including here the first two chapters of **Conjuring For Beginners**, also available on Amazon. Enjoy.*

Richard Milton

Conjuring For Beginners

Richard Milton

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Zurich, Switzerland

By lunchtime, almost all the employees of Hoffman Brothers had evacuated the factory and offices. Only two people were left in the building.

Herbert Mann, the production director, held open the side door of the main office block and screamed. 'Leave them. Just leave them, for God's sake. They're too heavy to carry. We have to go. Now.'

Inside, Frau King felt trapped. She was caught between the director's insistence and her sense of duty to save the two Remington typewriters sitting in their glass cases. She called back, more forcefully than she intended, 'I'm sorry, Herbert. I can't just abandon them . . .'

Mann said, 'Oh, forget it,' let go of the door and walked away. She heard the door bang shut, heard him start her Fiat in the car park and the sound of its engine fading as he drove away, leaving her alone.

The typewriters were antiques, black enamel and gilt, part of the collection of vintage office machines of Mr Hoffman senior, the firm's founder. She knew he would be horrified at losing his treasures, but it really wasn't her responsibility. Mr Hugo and Mr Moritz were in charge now, but they had left an hour ago in a chauffeur-driven Mercedes, without so much as a word of goodbye. She'd stood at the office window watching them go. They didn't even look up at her - just stared straight ahead as their car nosed a path through the crowds of employees in the yard, herding them aside like cattle.

All the other office and factory workers had gone now. She was left alone in the deserted building on the industrial park, in the middle of nowhere. She didn't know what else to do, so she knelt

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down on the carpet amid the debris of papers that people had dropped in their haste, and began to tidy up, gathering the scraps of waste paper around her. As she bunched up litter in both hands, she sobbed quietly to herself, her cheeks streaming with makeup. She could have screamed at the top of her voice now for all the difference it would have made, but that wasn't her way.

She just couldn't understand how it had happened so quickly. She had worked for old Mr Hoffman for twenty years and the sons, Moritz and Hugo, for seven. She had worked under the Englishman, Mr Daniels for twelve months and this morning, without warning, the whole company had fallen apart, and no one knew why.

They said the police had raided the factory building at dawn with a bulldozer or something. One story she heard said the FBI were in on it. All she knew for certain was that Mr Daniels had disappeared and was long gone and word was passed round that the whole place was being closed down, just like that.

Frau King recovered her self-control and got to her feet, wiping the remains of tears from her face with the back of her hand. She let the litter she had collected fall to the floor – it was a hopeless task and now a pointless one.

She made a conscious decision to abandon the typewriters and walked resolutely to the side door through which Herbert had left. She set the catch, stepped outside and pulled the heavy fire door closed behind her until she heard it lock. For a moment, she rested her head against the door, eyes closed, saying goodbye to the old place. She felt relief at having performed this act. This was the real reason she had delayed, she realised. It wasn't the typewriters. She wanted to be the last person out of Hoffman Brothers. The cowards may have deserted the sinking ship, but she alone was worthy of performing the last rites. She had stayed and done her duty. Whatever happened now was in the hands of Fate – not something for her to worry about.

She walked through the car park – strangely bare - past the empty brick security hut at the entrance, under its red and white barrier, now standing open. She thought she heard some noises coming from the high-security end of the compound, near the incinerators and Mr Daniels's office. There could still be people

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about over there, but she knew they couldn't be Hoffman employees, as that area was strictly forbidden. Perhaps looters were already at work. She stayed to this side of the hut, keeping out of sight.

She hurried down the exit drive, between the pines, and started walking down the mountain road in the direction of central Zurich, telling herself she must stay strong. She had never hitched a ride in her life and wondered if anyone would stop to pick her up, but no traffic was passing in either direction. The tarmac was still slick and black from rain earlier in the morning and she took extra care with every step, walking in her high heels on the glassy surface, looking back over her shoulder every few paces in case a car came.

She'd ventured less than a hundred metres when she was slammed to the ground by the shockwave from an explosion that erupted from the factory end of the compound. The blast sent dirty smoke rocketing high above the pine trees, showering the road with fragments of wood and metal, filling the air with an acrid stink piercing her nostrils and eyes. The explosion was so loud it hurt and for a few seconds she could hear nothing but the echoes in her own head. She was as helpless as the leaves that were stripped by the blast and blown over the road. Around her, tiny bits of white paper fell like snow, glowing red at the edges where they burned as they fluttered down. They settled on her clothes and she smelled the wool of her tartan skirt and top catching alight.

She scrambled to her feet, put her hand over her mouth and nose and ran in her high heels until she was clear of the suffocating smoke and smell. She threw herself down on the grass verge and began violently scrabbling with her hands at her clothes, sobbing as she beat at the scorched scraps that were landing on her like fireflies.

The howl of an engine being gunned startled her and she looked back to see a dark metallic grey van with tinted windows swerving out of the exit road from the factory and racing past her. She thought these must be the people who had caused the explosion but had no idea who they were.

The van sped past her at sixty or seventy then screamed to a halt in the middle of the highway. It reversed, wheels spinning, back to where she sat and the front passenger door slid open with an angry

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thump. A dumpy little woman dressed in a dark jump suit and wearing a black ski mask clambered out and dropped to the road. From the belt of her trousers, she pulled out a snub-nosed pistol which she pointed at Frau King.

Her pale green eyes glared malevolently through the ski mask as she asked in a guttural voice, ‘Hoffman’s?’

Frau King stood up and nodded. She pointed to herself and said, ‘Léonie King’.

The woman was silent for a moment and Frau King thought she was some kind of armed robber, waiting to be bought off. She reached for her handbag but remembered it was in the back of her Fiat and was long gone with Herbert Mann.

Instead of demanding money, the woman asked, ‘You know the Englishman called Daniels?’

Frau King smiled eagerly. ‘I work for Mr Daniels.’

The woman said, ‘You tell me now. Where is Englishman Daniels?’

Frau King’s smile dropped away. She said bitterly, ‘He’s gone. He left a long time ago. No one knows where he is.’

The woman raised her pistol, fired twice into Frau King’s face and watched as her body toppled back across the grass verge. She put the pistol into her waistband, climbed back into the van and waved the man behind the wheel to drive on.

The paper fragments, their edges glowing red, continued to fall and settled on Frau King’s face and body like smouldering snowflakes.

One

Rosa Daniels stepped down from the Geneva-Lausanne express as it squealed to a halt in Romont station. She put down her travel bag and looked both ways along the platform but saw no one else. Behind her, she heard the sleek silver coaches pulling out again without waiting even a minute. No one but her was getting off, she realised. She was here alone. And here was nowhere.

She hadn't expected a welcoming committee, but the deserted station seemed to mock her decision to come to Switzerland at all. *Why the hell have I bothered to travel a thousand miles to bury a prize bastard like Ferdy?* But the answer was the same as always.

As the departing train slipstreamed past her, she picked up her bag and walked the empty platform to the cuckoo-clock station building. Already, the morning sun was high, the air shimmered and the asphalt surface was hot beneath her sandals.

The ticket office and entrance hall were empty. No one was even on duty to collect her ticket. She walked on out through the booking hall to the taxi rank outside where she felt relieved to see some sign of life. She found a bloated driver in a worn leather jacket sitting idly behind the wheel of an old white Mercedes, reading the racing pages of *Vingt Minutes*. She saw him look up, hastily drop his paper on the passenger seat and reach back to open the rear door for her, smiling to celebrate his good luck. It was the smile she had seen a thousand times from a thousand men. The smile that said the last thing he was expecting this morning was a tall, attractive Englishwoman for a fare.

Rosa climbed in the back and hunted in her bag for the slip of paper with the address. 'I'm going to Chemin de Mirabeau - Apartments Louis Napoleon,' she said. She looked at her wristwatch for added emphasis. 'I'm in a hurry. I have to be there before twelve.'

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The driver took the slip of paper from her hand, nodded his assent and pulled away, his tyres screeching to impress her with his sense of urgency. He appraised her in the mirror a couple of times, and she could see his mind working as he decided which chat-up line to try out.

'English?' he asked.

She nodded. 'Yes, English.' The driver's reaction was so familiar, she responded on autopilot. Her lips half-parted in a friendly smile, but it was a smile that said *in your dreams*.

The driver persisted anyway 'Holiday?'

'No. Just visiting for the day.'

His face clouded over as he put two and two together. 'Apartments Louis Napoleon - you've come for the funeral.'

'Yes, the funeral,' She agreed. Romont must be a very small place, she realised. Word had got around.

'You are a relative?' He asked.

'He was my father.'

The driver shrugged and said, 'I'm very sorry, Mam'selle Daniels . . .' and fell silent. Her own name sounded unfamiliar in a French accent - *Darnyell*.

The Mercedes whined uphill to the village centre and Rosa stared in silence as the tourist-brochure houses slid by, colour-washed in pinks and blues, with carved wooden shutters and gables. It wasn't only her name that was odd here. She felt alienated equally by the strange tongue and this strange town, where Ferdy had chosen to die.

The driver looked again in his rear view mirror, nodded and said, 'Friends of yours?'

She looked round and saw that close behind them was a large metallic-grey van with tinted windows.

'Nothing to do with me.'

'Well, they were waiting at the station, too.' He said, shrugging.

The taxi drew up outside a fading second-empire building turned long ago into apartments, and now a shabby hulk. Rosa searched again in her bag and handed the driver a banknote bearing a picture of William Tell. He examined the heroic face on the note

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critically. 'I will frame this, Mam'selle,' he said sourly. 'To go with all your father's IOUs.'

Rosa was taken aback, feeling this bitter remark implicated her, too. She had expected her visit to Romont to be anonymous, without complications, her father finally forgotten and harmless. *I've only been here five minutes and bloody Ferdy has caught me again . . .*

She said, 'I'm sorry . . . I didn't know. If there are any outstanding debts . . .'

The driver smiled grimly and reached back to open the door for her. 'Forget it, Mam'selle,' he said. 'No one 'ere ever expected to get paid by Ferdy Darnyell. And this is a sad day for you. My sympathies.'

She stood on the pavement as the taxi pulled away, looking up at the carved wooden front doors, searching for a bell to press, when a woman in dark clothes emerged from a side entrance and flapped towards her like a skinny raven.

'Mam'selle Darnyell?' She asked. Rosa nodded, admitting to her newly discovered name, despite its alien sound.

The woman was sixty, thin-faced, disappointed. Her concession to the occasion was a large black silk shawl, fringed with tassels, an antique mourning garment as old as her apartment building, thrown over her everyday clothes, giving her the appearance of crow's wings.

'I am Polito. The 'ousekeeper. If you will follow me, I will take you to the cemetery.'

The skinny woman seemed to have been waiting some time for her to arrive and set off impatiently down the road at a brisk pace, born on air currents by her winged shawl. Rosa walked after her, trying to keep up. Eventually she managed to draw abreast.

'Excuse me, Madame. What about my father?'

The thin woman spoke without stopping but slowed slightly as a concession to the bereaved. 'My sympathies, Mam'selle. The mortician will bring your father's body. The casket could not remain alone in the apartment. The other residents objected, you see . . .'

She resumed her rapid flapping pace.

Rosa said nothing but smiled coldly to herself. That was Ferdy. Still causing trouble. Even beyond the grave.

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At the end of the street they came upon a low white wall and beyond it an expanse of neatly-trimmed cemetery surrounding a tiny ornate church couched in the hillside. Rows of pale marble headstones and crosses glared in the midday sun among unnaturally precise paths and miniature emerald lawns. A man in undertaker's black suit stood talking casually with the priest beside an open grave. Two pink-faced overweight pallbearers in dark suits sat on the tailboard of an ageing Volvo hearse, chatting amiably over the pale oak coffin between them.

As Rosa and the housekeeper entered the cemetery, the undertaker discreetly disposed of a cigarette, the pink pallbearers sprang to their feet and the priest walked to greet her, holding out a welcoming hand.

The housekeeper, Polito, remained standing respectfully behind her as the two men and the undertaker took the casket from the hearse and lined it up beside the grave while the priest began right away to intone automatically the words of the service in French.

Rosa glanced around the cemetery and saw only one other person paying their respects, a tall man in his 50s, handsome in a lived-in kind of way, standing among the marble crosses, a discreet distance away. He had the carefully brushed silvery hair of a merchant banker or judge. He smiled briefly and she smiled back. Then her smile turned to anger when she realised that, though he wore a black tie and armband, the smiling man also endured the discomfort of a raincoat despite the sunny weather. The unnecessary coat and the way he openly watched her said 'police'. She glared briefly at him then dismissed him from her mind, concentrating instead on the words of the service in French - more words made unfamiliar by a foreign tongue.

As the bearers took the strain on the ropes to lower the coffin into the grave, she became aware of a disturbance behind her and saw heads beginning to turn. She looked around and felt the blood fall from her face. The dark van that had followed her taxi earlier was smashing through the perimeter fence and driving at speed across the perfectly kept lawns and paths, churning dark tracks in the grass as it bumped ferociously towards them.

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The van slewed to a halt only feet from the graveside, its wheels spewing brown earth, and two men dressed in dark clothes, wearing ski masks, jumped out even before it had stopped. They carried assault rifles cradled in their arms.

Rosa stood frozen in the eerie silence that followed the van stopping, not knowing what was happening, unsure what to do.

From the front passenger seat of the van a small dumpy figure, also dressed in black trouser suit and ski mask, strode to the grave and motioned to the bearers to set the casket down at the graveside. She beckoned to one of the armed men and he knelt beside the casket, lifted an electric hand tool and started removing the lid from the coffin.

Rosa and the grey-haired policeman both reacted at the same moment. They started towards the coffin. Rosa said, ‘what the hell do you think . . .’ but she was silenced by the woman who simply pointed an automatic pistol at her, saying nothing. Pale green eyes glared through her ski mask.

The policeman reached inside his raincoat as he walked towards the grave. Rosa couldn’t tell whether he intended to produce some kind of ID or whether he was reaching for a weapon, but it was irrelevant as he was cut short by the man kneeling at the graveside. He grabbed his automatic rifle, sprang up and clubbed the policeman alongside the head with the butt. The policeman fell to the ground and lay there, on his back, unmoving, blood running down his face from an angry wound.

The second armed man raised his weapon and fired a short burst of automatic shots into the air as a warning. Rosa froze again. She saw the housekeeper, Polito, sink to her knees and cover her eyes with her hands. She looked as though she was praying.

The policeman’s attacker coolly resumed his position beside the coffin and continued unscrewing the securing bolts from the casket lid. The whine of his electric tool was the only sound she could hear in the silence that fell. When he had removed the lid, the man calmly pulled out a mobile phone, raised it and took a photograph of the body in the casket - Ferdy’s body.

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The man held up his phone for the woman to inspect. She glared briefly at it, nodded, apparently satisfied, and motioned with her pistol to replace the coffin lid.

When the lid was back in place, the dark-clothed figures backed towards the van, leaped onto the open doors, and kept their weapons trained on the funeral party as the van reversed along the track it had made before, reaching the road, and revving off at high speed, tyres screeching.

Everyone remained frozen for a second. Rosa was first to react and went at once to the policeman who seemed to be coming round from the beating. She knelt beside him, took off her black linen jacket, rolled it up and put it under his head. The man put his hand up to cut on his cheek, weeping blood, and said, ‘Thank you, Mam’selle Darnyell. I do not need any ‘elp – but I thank you anyway.’

He climbed groggily to his feet, holding a handkerchief to his cheek. He reached down, picked up her jacket, dusted it off and politely handed it back to her saying, ‘That is no way to treat the designs of Mr Hugo Boss.’

Rosa was about to reply when a police car skidded to a halt in the road outside, its two-tone horns rising and falling, joined moments later by a second patrol car. Someone had heard the gunfire and reported it, she realised.

The injured detective walked down to meet them, holding high the ID wallet he had failed to produce the first time. He stood in conversation with the officers, gesturing towards her, while the uniformed men looked suspiciously in her direction more than once. After some minutes, they retreated to their car and started calling in their report.

The detective came back to the graveside saying, ‘I’ve persuaded them to leave us alone to complete the service.’ To the minister he said, ‘You can carry on, Father.’

Rosa stepped forward, holding up her hand like a traffic policeman. ‘Just hold on a minute. Who put you in charge, here? This is my funeral – I mean my father’s funeral. And I want to know what the hell is going on – I beg your pardon, Father.’

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The detective said gently, 'I'm sorry Mam'selle. I should 'ave explained better. The local police wanted to take your father's body away for examination – to determine if any crime has been committed. I persuaded them that the interests of justice would best be served if your father's funeral went ahead as planned. But I had to promise them you would answer a few questions in Geneva before you return home. I have to go with them now to give a full report.'

Rosa shrugged. 'Okay then. I suppose that's for the best.' She nodded her assent to the priest who resumed the ritual.

Rosa felt an anxious air still hanging over the cemetery and she detected a hint of haste in the priest's practised professionalism. The pallbearers seemed specially edgy and continued to cast nervous glances at the wreckage of the street fence. But whatever ill wind had blown into the little town so swiftly and so violently was long gone. She looked at her own hand, found it quite steady and was amazed at how calm she felt.

After the ceremony, the priest came to her and shook her hand, a pained expression on his face. 'How terrible for you, Mam'selle! It was unforgivable – those people were animals. I am sure our police will find them.'

Rosa shook her head and said. 'It's all over, now. I just want to forget it. My father is buried, that's all that matters.' She asked, uncertain, 'About the funeral - is there a fee to pay?'

'No fee, Mam'selle.' The priest told her. 'Your father was not a religious man, but he was a member of our little community for some time.'

Rosa gestured around her at the beautifully kept little cemetery, now looking a mess. 'But the cost. All this . . .'

The priest chose his words carefully. 'Your father knew he was ill and the end was coming. He made all the arrangements himself before he . . . Well, he was a brave man.' He shook her hand in a friendly but unmistakably final manner. Ferdy had paid one debt at least.

She felt a light touch on her arm and found Polito, the housekeeper, her white face streaked with tears. 'Oh Mam'selle. I am so, so sorry.' She said. 'Everything is ruined.'

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Rosa returned the touch and gave her an encouraging smile. 'Please don't upset yourself, Madame,' she said. 'It's not your fault. They were probably madmen, or terrorists or something. They won't be coming back now.'

Madame Polito dabbed at her eyes with a lace handkerchief. 'There are some of your father's things that must be cleared from his apartment, Mam'selle. If you wish to accompany me . . . ?' She led Rosa back to the apartment block where she produced a large bunch of keys and let them in through the street doors.

A gloomy unlit hall led them to a circular staircase that had once been gilded and magnificent but now merely trapped dust in its cast iron floral balustrades. The only light floated weakly down from a grimy circular skylight five floors above them. Madame Polito led the way briskly up all five floors; a daily contest with the stairs seemed to be the source of her birdlike agility.

She stopped on the top floor before a shabby front door, produced her bunch of master keys again and opened up. She went in first and held the door, waiting. Rosa expected her to take charge of some kind of guided tour but Madame Polito merely stood aside, waiting with an air of quiet reverence.

The room she entered was a cramped bed sitting room with a curtained off galley kitchen. It smelt cold and un-lived in. Apart from a white painted wooden bed, covered with an embroidered eiderdown, the only furnishings were a worn brown leatherette armchair, a folding table and a battered oak desk in the window. She could see few ornaments or personal items. The only pictures were faded Alpine engravings that looked as though they had hung on the apartment walls for a century or more.

The sole sign of the personality of the flat's occupant were photographs on the mantelpiece over a dusty brown-tiled fireplace. One was of Rosa's mother. The others were school photos of her, taken when she was eleven or twelve. They had been taken fifteen or more years ago, but she felt as though she had posed only yesterday. They seemed as frozen in time as the town itself.

The Spartan room was not what she had been expecting. Ferdy may have been a feckless, drunken dreamer but he had also been highly gregarious as well - too extrovert for his own good, most of

the time. This room looked to her like the home of a tragic loner. Rosa started to feel the sad beginnings of guilt – the guilt she had kept at bay for years. She was curious about how Ferdy had spent his last years but the thin-faced housekeeper looked the last person on earth to be given to gossip.

Rosa asked, as casually as she could manage, 'What was he like - living here?'

Madame Polito shrugged with indifference. 'He kept himself to himself, Mam'selle, like most of them 'ere. He could be a bit wild at times, but he lived like a monk.'

Rosa dropped the rest of her questions as beyond answer and, anyway, now academic. She started to gather up the photos and realised she had brought nothing with her to pack his things in. She took a few paces towards the bed, and idly opened the door of the wall cupboard. She found it was his wardrobe hung with a few shirts, jeans, a couple of old jackets. A pair of well-polished shoes rested neatly on the floor where he had last placed them. She felt another pang of grief at this simple sight and knew she hadn't the strength to delve any further.

She looked around the room and gave up any pretence at inspection. Everyone knew that Ferdy was penniless. It was obvious the room contained nothing of any value and looking at it for the benefit of Madame Polito seemed a pointless charade.

'There's nothing here that I want. It can all be thrown away or given to a charity shop. Do you have those here?'

'What about the box, Mam'selle?' The housekeeper asked and went unerringly to the bottom drawer of the desk that stood in the window.

Her curiosity aroused, Rosa joined her and knelt on one knee beside her. In the bottom drawer of the desk was a small wooden chest a little bigger than a shoe box. She took off the lid, looked in and, with an emotional shock she thought no longer possible, found her childhood inside.

Carefully laid in the box were the white cotton gloves, the magic wand, the cup and balls, the marked cards, the paraphernalia of countless conjuring shows her father had given at her birthday parties when she was a little girl.

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These faded tokens, meaningless to anyone else, carried a high-voltage charge for her. It struck, Taser-like, through the emotional insulation she had built up over the years and stung her to the heart. Rosa sank to both knees and felt a nauseous wave that welled up from deep in her childhood and stabbed now at her eyes as she fought back the tears. With the ripping away of her defences came the old familiar sense of revulsion at Ferdy, his deceit and his lies. She shook away the moment of weakness and stood up abruptly.

'Well, Mam'selle?' The housekeeper asked.

'I . . . I don't think any of it is worth keeping . . . ' Rosa said as she turned to leave.

'And the key, Mam'selle?'

Rosa turned back to her, puzzled. 'The key?'

The housekeeper picked up the lid of the wooden box and pointed to its inside. Taped to it was a piece of string tied to a blue plastic disc. On the end of the string was a key. It looked like a front door key but more ornate.

'It must have been important. Or he wouldn't have put it in here.'

Rosa was about to say, 'Please throw it all away', but the housekeeper acted first. She put the key and the other things back into the box, closed the lid and handed it to her with a sympathetic smile.

'You should take something. Take this, at least. Today, remembering is painful and you just want to forget. But the pain will go and you will want a keepsake, one day.'

Rosa received the box and thanked the housekeeper. 'Please take anything you wish for yourself, Madame,' she said. She cast one last look around the shabby flat and left.

She walked back down the street to the station with the box under her arm, feeling very alone, occupying her mind by trying to be logical, making travel plans for the journey home. Now that time was no longer so pressing she could catch the local train into Lausanne and then the next Regio express back to Geneva. She would have to call in at police headquarters and make her statement, but apart from that chore she had no urgency about returning home. She'd got the whole week off from her magazine. *God knows it's time they learned to do without me for a bit.*

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She decided she might as well make the best of it, and try to enjoy the enforced journey. She began to play with the idea of travelling back to London by train rather than the routine trip by air, maybe even stopping over in Paris on the way, doing a little shopping.

As she reached the end of the Apartements Louis-Napoleon, a man's head leaned out of a black Peugeot parked in the kerb. It was the greying head of the detective from the cemetery; the one with the unnecessary raincoat. He called to her as she passed and she hesitated. He spoke English well but was obviously Swiss or French. 'I 'aven't had the chance to thank you properly Mam'selle. Or to express my condolences on your father's death.'

Despite his chivalry during the attack - and a charismatic profile - Rosa took a dislike to the intrusive Frenchman. She felt irritated that he had come back and hung around for so long merely to waylay her, and she suspected he had some agenda of his own, so she merely nodded and carried on walking. The detective put the Peugeot in first gear and drove along slowly, keeping pace with her, leaning out the window. 'Ferdy was a remarkable man,' he said casually, as though speaking of a personal friend. 'But 'e was a con man to the end, n'est ce pas?'

Rosa felt even more nettled by this over-familiar approach but she merely continued to walk silently along Chemin de Mirabeau, ignoring him.

"He conned us all to the end, though, didn't he?" The man insisted with a self-mocking laugh. 'You, too, I bet.'

Stung for a second time by the uncanny accuracy of his personal remarks, Rosa stopped, turned and faced him, her face flushing. 'What gives you the right to criticise my father?' She demanded. 'You know nothing about him.'

She started walking again and the man followed her in the Peugeot as before. 'Excuse me, Mam'selle,' he said. 'I intend no criticism I assure you. I was one of his greatest admirers. Ferdy Darnyell was the greatest con man of all time. An artist.'

Rosa crossed the road to get far away from the persistent Frenchman. He stopped the car and leaned out of the passenger

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window side. 'Are you going to Geneva, Mam'selle? Can I offer you a lift?'

Until now, she had kept it together since arriving in Switzerland and remained the calm professional Rosa Daniels, expert on keeping cool and keeping men at bay. But this intrusive Frenchman was one burden too much to bear and she felt the anger welling up inside her and, with it, the tears - the first she had shed since receiving the phone call from the village priest a week ago.

She stopped walking and glared at the greying man, and was surprised to hear her voice breaking up as she said, 'Why can't you just . . . piss off and leave me alone?'

The man shrugged wearily as he put the Peugeot in second gear and inclined his head in a slight bow. 'My apologies, Mam'selle. I will do as you suggest.'

* * *

'Do you have any idea who they were?' The Swiss police inspector seemed as anxious as Rosa for their interview to be at an end. He had asked only a few brief questions and made equally scant notes of her answers.

Rosa said, 'No idea at all. They came completely out of the blue.'

'What exactly do you think they wanted? Something of your father's - M'sieur Darnyell?'

'I really haven't a clue. They took a photo but I've no idea why. Why don't you ask your own man? The detective who was there?'

The inspector showed some interest for the first time. 'What detective? We had no one there, Mam'selle.'

'Yes you did. The man in the raincoat with a black tie. He had some kind of ID card. He talked to the uniformed police when they arrived. He came here to make a report.'

The inspector riffled through the cardboard file in front of him, his lips pouting sceptically.

'There's nothing here about any of that. None of our men was assigned to attend your father's funeral - that never happens,

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anyway. And no report from any other witness. This personne must have been deceiving you, Mam'selle.'

* * *

She left the Eurostar at St Pancras and climbed, exhausted, into a black cab, giving the driver the address of her flat in Greenwich. It was a long taxi ride and an expensive one, but she was too tired and too washed out to be bothered with yet another train.

The long journey from Geneva to Paris, and then Paris on to London by rail had seemed a romantic idea at the time, but the trip had been both laborious and depressing. The train was half empty and her fellow passengers just self-absorbed business people. In any case she hadn't felt like talking. Even Paris had been grey and dull, as though the whole world were in mourning.

She relaxed, sighing, into the back of the London taxi, welcoming the sight of familiar grimy streets, and lay her head back on the rest. She felt drained, the only emotion that remained was relief that it was all over; that Ferdy was gone for good. The man she hated and loved above all others was a thing of the past. Now, at last, she could forget him and get on with the rest of her life.

***Conjuring for Beginners* is available on Amazon
in paperback and Kindle formats**

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