



Shadows In Paris (Seagrove & Raven #2)

Author: *Rachel Henke*

Category: Historical

Description: January 1941

Special Operations Executive agent Lizzie Beaumont—codename Seagrove—faces her most dangerous mission yet: running a Resistance network in occupied Paris with Hannah, a Jewish operative who risks everything to infiltrate German High Command.

Caught between duty and desire, Lizzies commanding officer and lover, Captain Jack King, must choose between sending her into mortal danger or keeping her safe in England. But Jack and Lizzie cannot refuse the call to serve, or there may be no future worth fighting for.

A pulse-pounding, heart wrenching historical romance of courage and resistance, proving the most powerful weapon in love and war is hope.

Love or loyalty: their choice could kill them both.

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CHAPTER 1

London, January 1941

Lizzie Beaumont burrowed her hands deep into the pockets of her winter coat as the icy winds swirled around her and she made her way towards the Special Operations Executive HQ on Baker Street.

‘Cold enough for you, miss?’ asked the rosy-cheeked door attendant as she passed him and entered the building.

‘It certainly is.’ Lizzie flashed him a smile as she unbuttoned her coat and slipped it off her shoulders to reveal her new khaki uniform.

Val, Lizzie’s mentor, had surprised her the previous evening with the First Aid Nursing Yeomanry uniform. ‘Now you’re an official FANY, you’d better start dressing like one.’

The sight of the pressed uniform draped over her chair had startled Lizzie. ‘I thought the FANY rank was only for cover. I didn’t realise I’d need a uniform like a real soldier.’

Val looked amused. ‘It is for cover. Go and change. Let’s see you in all your glory.’

Lizzie ran her fingers down the starched material of her jacket and straightened her tie. The expression on her mother’s face the previous evening when she arrived back at the house in Regent’s Park wearing her new uniform was priceless.

‘What the dickens?’ Rose said, her mouth falling open in surprise.

The uniform had a similar effect on her father and sisters, and they teased her again relentlessly at breakfast.

Val looked up from her desk when Lizzie knocked and entered her office.

‘Good morning. It really suits you,’ she said, her warm smile reaching her eyes.

Lizzie knew she was lucky to have Val as her mentor and had grown very fond of her since she’d been assigned as her assistant.

‘Thank you. Where do you want me today?’

‘Jack will run through your coding and radio operation training with you.’

Lizzie tried to suppress it, but her face flushed slightly at the mention of her commanding officer, Jack King. Val turned her attention back to the papers on her desk and Lizzie hoped she hadn’t noticed her young assistant’s hot cheeks. Even after months of working closely with Jack, she still found it difficult to act as though there was nothing intimate between them. Fortunately, Val and the others in the secret organisation set up the previous year to wreak chaos in Nazi-occupied territories, seemed to have no inkling they were involved. Jack said they were all far too busy juggling their workload and dodging Blitz bombs to notice what was going on right under their noses.

‘Right, that’s good. No matter how much they drilled the coding into my head at Bletchley Park, I’m still not sure I fully grasped it. Do you know where I’m to meet him?’ Lizzie asked.

Val nodded as she sharpened her pencil. ‘Yes, he said he’d be waiting for you in the

new cipher room.'

With that, Lizzie was dismissed and hurried out of Val's office, the chill of winter already forgotten.

Jack stood behind his desk when she entered the room, and she saw the appreciation on his face as he cast his dark eyes over her.

He let out a long, low whistle. 'Well, well, just look at you. You're a sight for sore eyes, Seagrove!'

Lizzie closed the door swiftly behind her, twirled around, and gave a quick bow.

Jack beckoned her to come closer as he moved from behind the desk, his arms reaching towards her. He was tall and well-built, and he towered over her as he enveloped her in his warm embrace. She tilted her chin upwards. His lips brushed hers, and she tingled from head to toe. He could still do that to her with a mere touch.

'Now we're both in uniform,' she said from within the safety of his arms, peering into his amused face. 'You look so dashing in yours, I bet the girls are swooning all the way down Baker Street when you go out.'

Jack laughed. 'I wear my overcoat in this weather, and I can assure you there's been no swooning.'

Lizzie touched his face and ran her fingers over his angular cheekbone. 'You look so handsome, I find that hard to believe, Captain King.'

Upon the successful completion of their mission in Reims the previous year, he had been officially promoted to captain and now wore his uniform to deflect questions about the nature of his covert work.

Jack pulled out a chair for Lizzie and she sat down. Then he poured her some coffee just how she liked it, and he joined her at the desk. Their knees touched as he pulled a sheaf of papers out of a nearby file.

‘How was Bletchley?’ he asked, his eyes searching hers. ‘We haven’t had a chance to talk about it.’

‘I got through it alright. I think. It was hard, though. I’m no maths boffin and the coding is complex.’

Jack nodded. ‘You’ll get the hang of it. It’s only normal, you’ll find it difficult at first. Remember, the finest minds in Britain devise these codes and work at Bletchley Park.’

Lizzie poked him lightly in the ribs.

‘Ouch, what was that for?’ he said, his deep voice playful.

‘Is that supposed to make me feel less out of my depth?’ Lizzie asked, a half-smile on her face.

‘Oh, I see. Well, no, I suppose not, but being out of your depth is what this job is all about. If it’s not complex, we will lose the war.’

‘True, I’ve been over my head from the very beginning when you said I wasn’t equipped for this kind of work.’

‘Let’s not get into all that again,’ Jack smiled, and raised one dark eyebrow. ‘I’ve apologised a thousand times about being such a clod back then, haven’t I?’

Lizzie placed her hand on his. ‘You have, darling. I just find it such fun to tease you

about it.'

There was a sharp rap at the door, and Lizzie withdrew her hand. They pulled apart, ever alert at the prospect of being caught out.

Lizzie lived on a knife's edge with her espionage work and secret relationship. But the thought of a life without Jack was unbearable.

Occasionally she tried to remember what it was like to be a normal young woman in her old Jersey life. She had no secrets then, and life had been simple and sweet. Until the War Office summoned her father to London on the outbreak of war. Lizzie, her mother and siblings had only just been evacuated from Jersey in time before the Germans bombed and invaded the defenceless Channel Islands. Her grandparents were still there, living under Nazi occupation. The thought made her shudder, and she pushed it fiercely from her mind as Val approached, her expression sombre.

'I've just had a message from Hannah.'

Lizzie and Jack both stared at Val, waiting to hear the latest news of the daring Jewish Resistance leader of the Liberty Network in Paris.

'Tell us,' Jack said.

Lizzie's pulse raced as she waited, the tension thick in the air.

'Hannah reports success with blowing up the latest railway targets.'

Lizzie sensed as much as she heard the ragged sigh Jack released. Hannah was his agent, and he felt responsible for her. He was always unsettled until they had an update, and updates were few and far between.

Sending messages to England via radio from Paris was a dangerous business. Hannah risked being intercepted by the Germans, and that would spell disaster for the budding network.

Val said, 'I spoke to the boss, and we've agreed it's time for Hannah to have more support from us. At the very least, she needs a backup operator. The network has been causing significant destruction to the German transport system and it would be a shame to have to lessen operations now.'

Jack lit a cigarette and pushed his floppy black hair off his forehead with an impatient movement. 'I don't follow. Why would they need to lessen operations?'

'Good question. What we didn't know until just now is that Hannah has managed to infiltrate the German High Command. She says she can't run the Liberty Network at the same level she's been doing, as well as be present in her new role.'

'What's her new role, exactly?' Jack asked, his voice dangerously low after a long pause.

'She's been assigned the position of personal secretary to a high-ranking Nazi officer at their headquarters in the heart of Paris.'

Jack crushed his cigarette in the ashtray and cursed, shaking his head. 'That woman must have a bloody death wish.'

Val studied Jack in silence as they ran the implications of the daring scenario through their minds. Eventually, she said, 'Hannah may well have a death wish, but you can't deny it's a tremendous opportunity.'

'What does it mean for us?' Lizzie asked, swallowing hard.

Jack cleared his throat. 'It means she has somehow insinuated herself into a role so she can presumably gain access to intelligence about their latest German operations.'

'She's fearless,' Lizzie whispered in awe.

'Fearless or stupid,' Jack snapped. 'I can never quite decide which.'

'Fearless,' Lizzie echoed, increasingly bewitched by the tales of the Resistance leader who ran circles round the Nazis in plain sight.

'Fearless is all very well, but who is going in as the backup operator?' Jack asked, his voice cold, as if he dreaded the inevitable answer.

Val's gaze switched immediately to Lizzie.

'Oh no,' Jack hissed. 'If anyone's going into that snake pit, it should be me or someone more experienced than Lizzie. Reims was one thing; Paris is quite another.'

'You know that's not going to happen, Jack,' Val said. 'We need you here at the centre of things. Besides, we have too many operational irons in the fire for you to be caught by the Gestapo. We can't risk it—you know far too much to be strolling around occupied Paris now.'

Jack released a measured sigh. 'Lizzie isn't ready to run the Liberty Network. You said yourself she needs time to practice after the Bletchley training.'

Lizzie sat in silence, watching them talk over her head, her heart hammering as she waited to hear her fate.

'Then you'd better get her ready,' Val said, turning briskly and leaving the room before Jack could say another word.

The door closed with a thud and Lizzie and Jack stared at each other, both realising the dreadful day was fast approaching when they would be parted again.

If Val said Lizzie was going to Paris, it was only a matter of time until she went.

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CHAPTER 2

‘I can do it, you know,’ Lizzie said, her eyes meeting Jack’s.

He leant back in his chair and a lazy ring of smoke floated over his head and drifted towards the dusty ceiling. He studied Lizzie with troubled eyes.

‘I know you can do it. But that doesn’t mean you should do it. And it doesn’t mean I have to like it.’

‘But this is what I signed up for,’ Lizzie said. ‘There’s no one else. You heard Val.’

‘Utter hogwash,’ Jack growled. ‘Things have changed since last summer now we’re officially set up. We have more agents in training. The plan is to set up multiple Resistance networks throughout France—and across Europe—but we have enough on our plate with F Section. The outcome of the war doesn’t rest solely on your shoulders, Seagrove.’

Jack often called her by the codename he had chosen for her, which was the name of her family home in Jersey. Lizzie liked it when he did. It signified the special bond they shared.

She reached for his hand and ran her fingers up and down his warm skin. ‘My darling Raven,’ she said. ‘What is the point of me being here if I refuse to do my bit? I may just as well be working in a factory and not have to hide our relationship. If we weren’t both SOE agents, we could be open about being together, couldn’t we?’

Jack rose from his chair and began circling the room, his long legs covering ground quickly. ‘Whilst all of that is true, there is plenty to keep you busy here. You don’t have to be active in the field. It’s too damn dangerous for you to go back in. What if someone recognises you, from last time?’

The thought had crossed Lizzie’s mind. She’d been in and out of France several times the previous year. She didn’t like to admit it, but Jack had a valid point.

‘Val warned me there would be a new mission soon, so I’ve thought about it a lot.’

In truth, she’d lain awake at night worrying about what it would be like to be dropped back into France. She worried that her success—if you could call it that—had been beginner’s luck, and next time she would face the terrible reality of being a proper agent. What if she fell short when she was tested on a new mission?

Hannah had proven herself time and time again. And Jack had been active in Military Intelligence long before the war. But Lizzie was still green behind the ears, an expression her father used when describing new recruits to his office.

Lizzie didn’t voice her concerns. What was the point? Jack had enough for them both, and she didn’t want to add to his worries. Instead, she sipped her seedy tasting coffee and then said, ‘I could go in disguise.’

Jack stopped pacing abruptly and swivelled to look at her. ‘What kind of disguise?’

She could tell he was intrigued. From their many conversations discussing the whys and wherefores of espionage, she knew Jack loved all things tradecraft.

‘I don’t know, but we could figure something out. What do other agents do? What did you used to do? Shall I dye my hair?’

Jack's lips stretched into an involuntary smile, almost as though he was entertained against his will.

'Fancy the idea of me as a blonde, do you?' Lizzie said, a cheeky smile crossing her red lips and lighting up her green eyes.

'Now that's something I'd like to see.' Jack offered his hand to Lizzie, which she took. He encircled her in his arms, and she sank happily into his large, comforting frame.

'You'd look gorgeous with any hair colour,' he whispered next to her ear, causing the flesh on her neck to erupt into goosebumps. 'How about I get some props, and you do a private showing for your commanding officer?'

Lizzie laughed. 'I might have known you'd come up with something like that. Alright, let's do it. You oversee my training, after all, don't you, Captain King?'

'Exactly, and I do take your training seriously,' he said, his lips brushing hers again. 'How about dinner tomorrow evening and then we'll go to my place? I should be able to get hold of some stuff by then. I'll raid wardrobe and the storeroom.'

'You've got yourself a date,' Lizzie said. 'Where shall we go to eat?'

'I thought we might go back to the bistro near St. Ermin's. I can't find anywhere as good near Baker Street. It's probably wiser to go a little further afield, now there are more people in the office, anyway.'

The following evening, the proprietor of their favourite bistro showed them to a candlelit table in a secluded granite alcove .

'Long time no see, Monsieur Jacques,' the man said in a thick French accent.

Jack replied in perfect French, telling him they had missed his delicious ragoût and even though they had moved office, they couldn't stay away.

A server filled their wineglasses, and Lizzie and Jack talked about their day.

'Did you think any more about turning down the Paris mission?' Jack asked after their food was served, and they'd eaten a few mouthfuls.

'Hmm, no. I mean, I thought a lot about going, not about not going.'

Jack said, 'Sometimes I wish I'd stuck to my guns and not recruited you at all.'

'Oh really? But then we wouldn't even be together,' Lizzie said, knowing he was just worried about her and didn't mean it.

'People who are meant to be together have a way of finding each other,' Jack said, with a hint of mystery.

Lizzie narrowed her eyes as she watched his face, now bathed in soft shadows that didn't detract from how handsome he was. His thick shock of black hair gleamed in the candlelight, and his dark eyes were hooded.

'I see why you got the codename, Raven. You remind me of one, sometimes,' Lizzie said.

Jack studied her as he drank his wine. 'This raven's job is to protect you. Don't change the subject, please!'

Jack was like a dog with a bone when he wanted something settled, and Lizzie could see this would not be a straightforward conversation.

She took another sip of wine and lay her cutlery on the plate to show she had finished. The food was as delicious as ever, but the portions were noticeably smaller. Supplies were harder to come by with each passing month and rations eked out further for every meal.

Lizzie said, 'The Liberty Network is based in Paris. I would have thought, it's unlikely I'll see anyone from Reims. When I met with Hannah briefly last time, I saw no one I knew, but like we discussed, a disguise would make it less likely I'd be recognised.'

Jack nodded, and she could tell he was mulling over the possibilities despite his reluctance. Lizzie didn't want to leave him any more than he wanted her to leave, but the sooner they defeated the Nazis, the sooner this whole nightmare would be over, and they could get on with living a beautiful life together.

That's what she told herself when she awoke in the middle of the night, anxious about what was in store for them in this war that seemed to only grow more deadly and showed no signs of ending.

Lizzie pressed on. 'SOE was formed for this very purpose. I can't say no when Hannah needs me. She's doing so much to support the Allies. It feels cowardly of me to sit here safe and sound in the office, when I could be in France doing what I can to help the network.'

'Did you not see the devastation on your way to work this morning, caused by last night's bombing raids? You're hardly safe and sound in the Blitz! This must be one of the most dangerous times to live in London.'

'I saw some bombed houses,' Lizzie confessed. 'It was heartbreaking. There was a woman searching through the rubble of her home. Her children were clinging onto her apron as she sobbed.'

Lizzie saw the anger etched into Jack's features, his jaw hardening as she told him what she had witnessed.

'I stopped to see if I could help, but there were so many people there already. I didn't know what more to do. Tragic scenes like that make me want to go after the bastards even more, to be honest.'

They took comfort in being close to each other, despite the daily horrors unfolding around them. They made the most of every snatched moment they could get. It was never far from Lizzie's mind that it might be the last. Jack was right, you didn't have to be in enemy territory to be killed in the war. The Blitz had been relentless in London since Black Saturday when she experienced her first bombing raid.

Lizzie reminisced about how young and naive she had been at the beginning of the war. She was young in years—still only twenty-one—but something harder had replaced the naivety.

In a matter of months, she had seen the worst of what humankind could do. Fortunately, she had seen some of the best, too. She thought briefly of the Resistance members in Reims who had been so brave in helping her and Jack to carry out their mission.

'Raven to Seagrove,' Jack said, snapping her attention back to the present. 'Shall we settle up and head off to my place?'

Lizzie tilted her head and smiled at Jack. 'Yes, darling. Let's go I told Ma and Pa I'm working the night shift. I hope that's alright with you?'

'You never have to ask. You know that. I hate sleeping without you.'

They walked arm in arm, coat collars up, against the bitter January cold.

Jack had moved flat. Now HQ was in Baker Street, it made sense to live closer. Lizzie conveniently lived at Regent's Park, which was within walking distance. They hopped off the Underground and then approached his door as he fumbled in his pocket for the key, and they entered.

He pulled the blackout curtain and lit some candles that were positioned strategically around the front room. 'We could work on the decoding, and you would become indispensable here in London. The powers that be were saying we can't keep relying on Bletchley for everything. We need to get our cipher room fully functioning to support all the new networks. It's vital so we can speed up the turnaround of the messaging.'

The emotions rolled through Lizzie as Jack helped her shed her coat, and she shivered in the chilly flat. She knew Jack was doing all he could to convince her not to go because he was afraid for her, and she loved him for it. Part of her wished she didn't need to go, but she must do her duty, or she was certain she would regret it forever.

Their feelings for each other had been intense since the previous summer and there were still days when she couldn't quite believe how it had all fallen into place for them. They managed to see each other most days, even if their time alone was fleeting. She didn't want to imagine what it would be like without him in her life.

Jack lit a fire and threw some wood onto the crackling flames.

'Come closer,' he said, sliding his arm around Lizzie's shoulders. 'This should warm you up in no time.'

He went to put the kettle on, and it wasn't long before they were sitting beside the roaring fire, drinking piping hot tea.

'Better now?' he asked.

Lizzie nodded gratefully. 'Much. I'm not used to these freezing winters. Jersey is milder than this.'

'I heard it's freezing in Paris too,' Jack said pointedly.

'I had better get used to it quickly then,' Lizzie said, placing her cup on the small table and rubbing her hands together in front of the orange flames. 'Sitting like this reminds me of Seagrove,' she said .

'Any word from your grandparents?'

Lizzie felt the panic rise in her throat. 'Nothing yet.'

'Those blasted Jerries,' Jack cursed. He rose from the chair. 'Chin up, beautiful. I'm sure you'll hear something soon. Come on, I've got some stuff for you to try on.'

Jack drew her to her feet, and she followed him into the bedroom where she saw disguise props laid out all over the bedspread.

'You have been busy,' she said. 'I can always trust you not to do things in halves.'

'Here, try this, for starters.'

Lizzie placed the blonde wig on her head, tucking her hair in until no brunette strands swept over her shoulders. 'How do I look?' she said, posing for Jack, hands on hips and pursing her red lips provocatively.

'Good enough to eat,' Jack said. 'Come here, blondie.'

Lizzie laughed but pressed her hands against his hard chest. 'No, let me try on a few more things first. I think going to France in disguise is the answer.'

Jack passed her more props and soon she was modelling different styled wigs and glasses with a variety of frames.

Jack stood back and assessed every look. 'You can pass as a blonde easily if we lighten your eyebrows, but the wigs aren't ideal for longer missions.'

'Oh? Why did you bring them then?' Lizzie asked, disappointment showing on her face, curving her lips into a pout.

'Because they allow us to see what works, and then you can dye and style your hair for a similar look.'

'Why not just wear a wig?' she asked.

'It's a dead giveaway if you're caught and questioned. The first thing the Gestapo would do is undress you and examine your clothes and possessions. If they realise it's a wig, it screams disguise and enemy agent. '

'Oh yes,' Lizzie said. 'I didn't think of that. What an amateur I am.'

'That's why you work with an old, experienced spy like me,' Jack said, winking.

'You're not that old,' Lizzie teased. 'Well, quite old, but just right for me.'

'Is that so?' Jack said, pulling her nearer and closing the gap between them. 'Come on, I've had enough of playing dress-up.'

'What did you have in mind?' Lizzie asked, as his lips claimed hers and he kissed her until she quivered with desire.

'How about playing dress-down? Let's get this dress off you and then climb into bed

before we freeze to death!’

Jack chased Lizzie and she tumbled onto the bed, laughing. Their lovemaking was at first playful but then grew more feverish as Jack touched her and made her scream with pleasure, and she, in turn, delighted him in the ways he had taught her.

Lizzie was a virgin when they met. Jack was a mature, skilled lover who knew exactly how to awaken her desires and introduce her to the joys of the flesh. She was a quick learner and knew intuitively how to bring him to the edge of abandon until he lost himself in her and she in him.

Seagrove and Raven were the perfect match in mind, body, and soul.

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CHAPTER 3

Lizzie and Jack were holed up in one of the dusty backrooms assigned to F Section at Baker Street. They ran through the codebook system Jack used with Hannah for radio messaging, and Lizzie remembered more about how it worked than she had given herself credit for.

‘Perhaps I’m ready, after all,’ she said, swishing her hair over her shoulders and appraising Jack with a bold stare.

Jack touched her cheek tenderly with his thumb and tucked a stray lock of hair behind her ear. ‘Seagrove. I don’t underestimate you for one minute. What you did on your missions was incredible, but the thing is you were a courier then. This operation with Hannah has even deadlier stakes. It’s going to be more dangerous altogether.’

‘More dangerous than being a honey trap for a Nazi general?’ Lizzie said, her eyes widening in disbelief.

‘I need more coffee,’ Jack said. ‘Want some?’

She nodded, and he left the room before returning shortly after with two steaming mugs of weak brown liquid that passed as coffee .

Jack continued their conversation as if they hadn’t stopped speaking. ‘The situation with the general was dangerous, of course, but it was an unexpected complication. Courier missions are more straightforward—there’s a clear start and end game. Typically, you deliver or collect information and then get out of enemy territory as

fast as you can and head for home.'

'Yes, but what's so much more dangerous about the new mission?'

'Well, you'll be in permanent danger, for one thing. Hannah has been running the Liberty Network for months now. You wouldn't be able to just parachute in and leave a few days later. We're talking deep undercover work, which requires a whole other level of skills and nerve. Her operation at German High Command could last weeks or even months, and if you're covering for her, you'd need to stay there whilst she's otherwise engaged.'

Jack sipped his coffee and lit a cigarette.

Lizzie saw the despair in his expression before he could hide it, and it tugged at her emotions.

In normal times, they would be planning their future together, not talking about how to outfox the Nazis and sabotage their killing machine.

'I don't like it, Lizzie. I don't like it one bit. Won't you change your mind whilst you still can? Let us find someone else who has lived in France.'

'We've been over this before. If it was you, we both know you would go in a heartbeat.'

'It's different,' he said.

'How, because you're a man and I'm a woman?' Lizzie's eyes blazed as she challenged him.

'No, it's nothing to do with that. Don't forget I recruited you because we want

women on board.'

'That's true,' Lizzie said. 'So what, then? '

'It's just about your lack of experience, as I keep trying to explain to you.' A hint of impatience entered his voice. He stood abruptly. 'I've got a meeting to attend.'

'Alright,' Lizzie said stiffly. The air between them was frosty, which made Lizzie uncomfortable. But she was going on the mission even though he didn't want her to, so she didn't know what to say to make things right. 'Shall I go back to Val's office or wait for you here?'

Jack's stern expression transformed into one of regret and diffused the tension in Lizzie's chest. 'Wait for me here, please. Sorry, I didn't mean to snap.'

Lizzie smiled at him. They rarely disagreed, but when they did, it was inevitably something to do with Jack trying to protect her. She couldn't be angry at him for that. He was both her commanding officer and her love, and they already knew the two didn't always blend harmoniously.

'Work on these in the meantime and see what you can decipher.' He pointed to the codebook and passed some more messages over for her to decipher.

Then she was alone with a jumble of letters, wondering what the future held for her in Paris. Nerves darted around her stomach as she tried to focus on cracking the coded messages.

When Jack returned, he looked even more troubled.

'What is it?' Lizzie asked.

‘It’s happening whether we like it or not, so all this discussion about whether you should or shouldn’t go is a moot point.’

‘Why, what did they say?’

‘I was overruled. The boss was there, and he and Val had already agreed you are the best agent for the job.’

His words evoked conflicting feelings in Lizzie. On the one hand, she was nervous about going on another mission, but on the other she couldn’t help being proud that they believed she could do a good job.

They had chosen her.

Hastily, she reminded herself; they only had a tiny pool from which to choose. There were new agents in training, but that didn’t mean they were mission ready. By some strange twist of fate, Lizzie was in the right place at the right time.

‘It will be fine,’ Lizzie said. ‘I will be fine. We have to believe that.’

Jack’s jaw hardened and she could see he was working to get a grip on his emotions.

‘You are right, of course. We have no choice now unless you reject the mission and you’ve made it clear you won’t do that,’ Jack said, a wistful note in his gravelly voice.

‘No, I don’t want to do that. I believe we were brought together for a reason and it’s not only about us loving each other.’ Lizzie paused and her eyes welled up.

Jack pulled her into his arms and stroked her hair as he held her tight. They didn’t move for several minutes, and the strong, steady beat of his heart tapped against her

chest, comforting her. No words were needed.

They both knew what was at stake. In the short time they'd known each other, an unbreakable bond had been forged.

When they drew apart, Jack asked how she had got on with deciphering the codes.

She showed him what she had done. 'It definitely makes more sense to me now. Thank you for taking me through it all again.'

'I only wish I could do it in your place,' he said, his dark eyes mournful.

'Will I take a codebook or use Hannah's?' Lizzie asked, diverting Jack from the sadness of their imminent separation.

He shook his head as if to bring himself back to the moment. 'We'll have to decide. Taking another book is a risk in case it falls into the wrong hands, but it will restrict our communication if you only have one between you.' Jack pursed his lips and stared into space. 'Every message you send puts you at risk. Please, please always remember that.'

'I guess we won't be sending daily love missives back and forth, then,' Lizzie said, smiling and shrugging her shoulders as if they were discussing something light and fun.

'Every day you're gone will seem like a year and I'll be waiting to hear from you,' he said. 'But yes, we must put our feelings aside to keep you and the network safe. Only send a message when it's absolutely vital. And I will do the same. I shall have to resist messaging you every day, even though my love-ravaged heart will be stricken in your absence.'

Lizzie laughed at his dramatic response. 'So you'll decipher my messages personally?'

'I'll make damn sure I do, even if I have to sleep in the cipher room!'

'That gives me courage.' Lizzie smiled. 'It'll be as if we're writing to each other even though we can't say much.'

Jack's eyes shone as he looked at her. 'You have such a powerful spirit, Seagrove. You and Hannah will make a formidable team. You already have all the courage you need. There's no doubt about that.'

Lizzie took this as a compliment of the highest order. Hannah had achieved incredible feats in early acts of Resistance in Germany and France.

'That means a lot. I promise I won't let either of you down,' she said, glowing.

'Letting us down is not my concern.'

'Then what is? Apart from my inexperience...' Lizzie prompted, always curious to better understand how Jack's mind worked.

'I'm more concerned about us not letting you down. You in Paris with Hannah in the midst of a den of Nazis is going to be tough to stomach. I just wish there were some other way.'

'But you agree this is for the best?'

'That may be a bit of a stretch. Not sure I'd go so far as to say it's for the best.' He raised one eyebrow and smiled wryly. 'But Hannah needs backup, and you are equipped to provide it, no matter how much I wish it were otherwise.'

‘Darling, you have trained me well,’ Lizzie said. ‘Please trust that we can do this. Together we can do this.’

The phone rang and Val asked Lizzie to come and help her with something in her office. Lizzie stood and ran her fingers through Jack’s glossy black hair.

He captured her hand and scattered a row of tender kisses onto her fingers. ‘Will I see you tonight?’

Lizzie eyes were full of regret. ‘I can’t tonight, darling. I promised to go to the pictures with Juliet and Evie. Ma might come too.’

‘Oh, that’s a fabulous idea.’

‘We’re doing our best to keep Juliet entertained. She gets so worried about Oliver,’ Lizzie said.

‘How lovely you are! Poor Juliet. It’s awful thinking of our loved ones battling the enemy in the skies. I try not to think too much about Henry, but it’s hard not to sometimes. My mother barely sleeps.’

Henry was Jack’s brother. It had been months since he had seen him, and Lizzie knew his mother worried a great deal about her son in the RAF. Just like her mother worried about Lizzie’s brother Archie who was fighting with the Royal Engineers.

‘It’s enough to drive us quite mad if we think too much about it. I try not to dwell on it, but a trip to the pictures is always a welcome distraction.’

‘Have a wonderful time and please take care,’ Jack said. ‘Get to the shelter if there’s a raid.’

‘I will,’ Lizzie promised, and they kissed one final time before they headed for the door.

Jack turned. ‘Tomorrow we’d better make plans for the logistics of the mission. We need to create a strong cover story for your family, for one thing.’

‘Shall I mention anything to them yet?’ Lizzie asked.

‘No, let’s get our story straight and you can lay the groundwork, then. We’ll run through it together.’

‘Did Val say when I need to go?’

Jack paused, and she heard him suck in his breath. ‘I believe it’s a full moon at the end of next week. We’ll pick the exact day and make our plan tomorrow.’

Lizzie let Jack’s hand go before they exited the room. Her palm felt cold without his touch.

‘I’ll see you in the morning. Seagrove?’ he said, stopping Lizzie in her tracks.

‘Raven?’ Her eyes were full of mischief.

‘You didn’t say what film you are going to see.’

‘You didn’t ask,’ she said, teasing him with a smile that lit up the whole corridor and took his breath away. ‘Gone With The Wind.’

‘How apt. Have fun, my darling,’ he whispered close to her ear. ‘Tell me all about it in the morning.’

CHAPTER 4

Most days Reginald Beaumont worked late at the War Office, but this afternoon the load on his desk had miraculously lightened, and his driver had dropped him at the house just in time for dinner with his family.

Lizzie and her sisters, Juliet and Evie, had all rushed home so they could make the pictures in time.

‘I’m so pleased we’re going to see the film,’ said Evie, buzzing with excitement as she helped herself to a modest portion of mashed potato.

‘Sorry about the lumps,’ said their mother, Rose. ‘It’s difficult to make smooth mash without using much butter and milk.’

Lizzie tasted a forkful of the potato with the flourish of a connoisseur. ‘It’s delicious, Ma.’

Rose said, ‘It’s good of you to say, darling Lizzie, but we can’t hope for it to be at the standard of our Seagrove mash. I used to put huge chunks of butter in it and even a dollop of Jersey cream.’

‘It was gorgeous,’ Juliet chimed in. ‘But Lizzie’s right. This is good too. You make marvellous meals, especially considering the rations.’

‘Where’s Violet?’ Evie, the youngest sister, asked, her copper curls bouncing about like a shimmering halo as she moved her head.

‘She’s got the day off. I had to queue at all the shops this morning. Violet is an absolute godsend; it took ages without her.’

Their new housekeeper had fitted in as though she’d always been with the family, and the girls were relieved to see their mother had help running the Regent’s Park house, and some company when they were all at work for long hours most days.

Juliet, the eldest of the three sisters, who was a salaried employee of the Mechanised Transport Corps, jumped up to clear the plates away as soon as she finished the meal. ‘Come on, let’s get moving or we’ll be late. I want to change.’

‘Me too,’ Lizzie said.

They ran upstairs and Reg settled in his favourite armchair, content at the prospect of a rare evening alone by the fire. He was proud of his girls, but they were noisy, and it would be a treat to read his newspaper in peace.

He worried about Lizzie and prayed the Special Operations Executive wouldn’t send her on another undercover mission. It was dangerous enough in London without risking her life in occupied France.

Reg hadn’t mentioned a word about it to his wife. He had never kept any family related secrets from her before, but he was bound by the Official Secrets Act so when his colleague Drake from the War Office broke the news to him that his daughter had been selected to join a new secret organisation commissioned by Churchill to support the Resistance and set Europe ablaze, he had to keep it to himself and hoped he wouldn’t live to regret it if the truth came out .

Rose poured him a whisky and dropped a tender kiss on his head before putting her coat on.

‘How do I look?’ she asked.

‘As beautiful as the day I first laid eyes on you,’ he said.

Rose beamed at her husband. ‘You old romantic.’

‘Every word is true.’

Their daughters trampling down the stairs like a herd of elephants broke the spell. Reg once again declined their offer to join them for the film and, one by one, they kissed his cheek and headed out the front door into the freezing evening following their mother. The cold didn’t dim their spirits, and they chattered all the way down the street.

‘This reminds me of the old days when we used to go to town in Jersey,’ Juliet said. ‘We would take Nan to see a film and sometimes she nodded off, remember?’

They laughed at the vision of their grandmother grabbing forty winks in the cinema, but the memory was tinged with an unspoken sadness.

‘Come on,’ said Rose, and they walked arm in arm and entered Baker Street station. Just being there reminded Lizzie of Jack, and she wondered if he was still at work. Knowing him, she guessed he probably was.

It wasn’t far to travel and soon they alighted from the Underground in Piccadilly Circus and walked the short distance to Leicester Square and entered the Ritz Cinema, where *Gone With The Wind* was showing.

Despite the film already showing for a long time, when they arrived, the cinema was packed, and they snagged the few remaining seats. The crowd was mesmerised by moving pictures and when the film started, a hush descended over the auditorium.

‘Isn’t Vivien Leigh beautiful?’ gushed Evie at the intermission when they went to the ladies and then queued for a bag of Dolly Mixture and a drink of fizzy pop to share .

They all agreed she was quite something, and it was strange that in the book she was described as not being all that pretty.

‘Rhett Butler is so dreamy. He could come and visit me any night of the week,’ Evie continued, in between sweets.

‘Evie!’ Rose said, appalled. ‘What promiscuous language you’ve developed since you’ve been volunteering in that sewing circle. Sometimes I wonder what goes on there.’

‘Oh Ma, it’s just a bit of fun. The men in the films are the only young men we get to see, what with them all away fighting. A girl can dream...’

‘Evie’s right,’ Juliet agreed. ‘Except for lucky Lizzie, here. She gets to see her handsome Captain King every day.’

Lizzie shushed her sister and tutted, but her cheeks turned a pale shade of pink. ‘I’ve told you there’s nothing romantic between us. Why do you insist on going on about him so?’

Lizzie turned a fierce stare on Evie to warn her to stay quiet on the matter. Her baby sister was the only one who had seen them together and knew there was something more than a boss-employee relationship between them. She had been sworn to secrecy in the name of the security of the nation, and Lizzie wasn’t beyond threatening her.

Juliet laughed. ‘Because anyone can see you are gaga for each other.’

‘Absolute nonsense,’ Lizzie said. ‘He’s my commanding officer. Those engine fumes must be addling your brain, darling Jules.’

‘Talking of you two,’ Juliet continued, undeterred, ‘Scarlett and Rhett have a big age difference just like you and your captain.’

Now Lizzie flushed bright pink, despite fighting to compose herself. ‘What guff you do talk. Even if it were true, we’re nothing like Scarlett and Rhett. Rhett is almost double Scarlett’s age!’

‘Ah, so you have thought about it,’ Juliet teased.

‘Oh, you!’ Lizzie punched her lightly on the arm and rolled her eyes, but her heart was beating uncomfortably fast, and she was relieved they couldn’t hear it.

‘The film is so romantic,’ Evie said. ‘Who doesn’t love a handsome scoundrel?’

‘It is romantic, although my Oliver isn’t a scoundrel and I’d always choose him,’ Juliet said. ‘I suppose I like a more dependable type.’

‘We’re drawing this conversation to a close right now,’ Rose said. ‘You girls are growing quite wild. I don’t know whether it’s the company you keep in London or the influence of wartime that’s having this effect on you. It’s quite unsettling.’

‘It’s neither, Ma. We’re just growing up, that’s all. And times have changed since you were our age. We can speak more freely,’ Evie said.

‘That you certainly do,’ Rose said, a hint of amusement ringing in her disapproving tone. ‘Come on, it’s time to go back in for the second half. Let’s hope things improve for Scarlett.’

The four of them emerged a few hours later, their faces pink and their eyes red-rimmed.

‘I thought for sure it would be a happy ending,’ sobbed Evie, clutching her handkerchief to her red nose.

‘Whatever gave you that idea?’ Rose asked.

‘Me too,’ sniffed Juliet. ‘I can get sad all on my own missing Oliver. I don’t need to watch a tragic four-hour film to do it. I feel quite distraught.’

‘Oh, come now,’ said Lizzie. ‘Cheer up. It was a sad ending, but like Scarlett said, “Tomorrow is another day.” We must be as hopeful as her if we’re to get through this war with our hearts in one piece.’

Rose looked at Lizzie. ‘My goodness, when did you become so wise, darling? You seem to have matured in the blink of an eye.’

Lizzie smiled, touched by her mother’s praise. ‘Well, I will be twenty-two soon, you know.’

Rose laughed. ‘Trust me, some of the oldest people have little real wisdom to show for their years on earth.’

Lizzie wondered why that might be. She felt as though she’d matured a lot since joining the SOE. Her missions in France had changed her profoundly. There was something about seeing your life flash before your eyes that did that to you, she supposed. She could easily have been killed in Reims, and it had given her a greater appreciation for life. Shaking her head, she pushed the frightening images out of her mind before the familiar fear gripped her.

Falling in love with Jack had changed her, too.

Keeping her work and her love for Jack a secret from her beloved family was hard. Only her father knew she was an agent, but she hadn't confided in him about her relationship with Jack.

They exited the building and joined the throngs of filmgoers flooding into Leicester Square.

'Let's go home for a cup of tea with Pa before bed, shall we?' Rose said.

They all agreed that was a lovely idea, and they huddled in their coats against the biting cold and hurried into the station.

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Source Creation Date: August 11, 2025, 10:00 am

CHAPTER 5

‘The mission is confirmed for the end of next week,’ Jack said with a sense of finality in his tone, the following morning in the office.

Lizzie stared at him, speechless, whilst she digested the reality of a new mission looming. She gulped. ‘What will I tell my family?’

‘We will create a cover story today so you can prepare them. It shouldn’t be too difficult now they know you’re in the FANYs. They travel quite a bit and work in various roles.’

‘I’d better warn you; my mother isn’t easily fooled. We’ll need something watertight,’ Lizzie said. ‘They’re still teasing me about being in love with Captain King, you know.’

‘Your mother is delightful. Perhaps I’ll pop in for tea and cake again when you return,’ he teased.

Lizzie knew he was trying to keep it light. They were both only too aware of the dangers and the fact was she might not return.

‘I’m glad your family approves. When this war is over, I hope they’ll be seeing a lot more of me,’ Jack said.

Lizzie was relieved he was back to showing his usual good-natured resilience. It unnerved her when he lost confidence in what they were doing. When he was strong,

it helped her stay strong.

‘I’m sure there’s nothing they’d like more. My mother even said our age difference could be a positive thing. Although, my father wasn’t so keen.’ Lizzie laughed.

‘Well, fathers and daughters. I would expect no less,’ Jack quipped.

‘Anyhow, we’ve got a lot to cover, so shall we get started before Val tears you away for one of her projects?’

Lizzie nodded, apprehension rising in her stomach. ‘Yes, let’s do it. What do you need from me?’ She reached out and touched the fine layer of dark stubble on his chin.

‘I was thinking about the radio operator situation, and how it will be more secure if we set you up with your own codes, rather than using the same as Hannah’s.’

‘That makes sense,’ Lizzie said.

‘You’ll need a book. One-time pads won’t be suitable for this.’

‘How long do you think I’ll be there?’

Jack released a heavy sigh. ‘Honestly, I wish I knew. Hannah wants backup so she can go undercover, which doesn’t sound like it will be a short mission. From what she’s said in her messages, it seems she’s intending to infiltrate the organisation for as long as she can.’

‘I’m concerned my mother will worry if I’m gone too long.’

‘I’ll be worried if you’re gone too long!’ Jack said. ‘Trust me, I will do everything in

my power to make this as short as it can possibly be.'

'At least my father knows the truth, or some semblance of it, anyway. I suppose I'm not permitted to let him in on any of the details of this mission?'

'Correct,' Jack said. 'I know it's difficult to keep secrets from our loved ones like this, but it's for the best for everyone's safety. Your father understands that better than most. He won't ask tough questions.'

'Yes, of course. And there's the minor fact that if I tell anyone, I'll be breaking the Official Secrets Act.'

'There is that,' Jack said wryly, pulling a cigarette from the packet in his breast pocket.

'May I have one?' Lizzie said.

Jack's hand paused mid-air, the cigarette not having reached his lips yet. 'One of these?' he asked, clearly astonished by her request.

Lizzie nodded. 'Yes. You were right when you said I should learn to smoke. It's a good distraction prop, not to mention a brilliant way of naturally getting into conversation with people.'

'I won't argue with that, although I'm not sure you'll enjoy it,' he said, smirking.

'I doubt I will enjoy it, but that's hardly the point, is it? After all, I don't enjoy flinging myself out of a plane in the dead of night, but I still do it when you tell me to.'

Jack's laughter echoed around the cold, quiet room. 'My goodness, you are brilliant,

Seagrove. I don't know where you got this attitude of yours, but it's priceless. As much as I'd like to keep you safe at home, you were clearly born for this. Without people like you, nothing in this mad world of ours would move.'

Lizzie's face shone. 'Thank you, Captain. That means a lot coming from you. Now show me how to light this cigarette so I can get the hang of smoking.'

'Let's start you off slow. I'll light this one for you, and you can take a few puffs. Like this, you see.' Jack demonstrated with his cigarette.

'Do I have to inhale like that?' she said, narrowing her eyes .

'Only if you want people to believe you're a real smoker,' he said.

Lizzie followed his example and spluttered and coughed after her first puff.

'It takes a bit of practice.'

'But it tastes like old socks! Why would people do this to themselves?'

'Tasted many old socks, have you?' Jack teased.

'You know what I mean,' she said, dissolving into laughter.

'I do. Like I say, it takes a bit of practice and it's also something of an acquired taste, but no self-respecting secret agent doesn't know how to smoke!'

'I'm not a real secret agent like you, though.'

'Yes, you are, Seagrove, and it's about time you got used to the idea.'

Lizzie tried another puff and spluttered again, flapping her hand in front of her face to waft the curtain of smoke away.

‘This is really awful,’ she said, and her expression made Jack laugh out loud again.

‘Let’s give it another go tomorrow, shall we?’

Lizzie nodded. ‘I think I’ve had enough for one day. I’m not sure I’m a natural born smoker.’

‘I’ll give you some tips tomorrow. Now would you like a coffee?’

‘Yes, please. I need something to get rid of that dreadful taste in my mouth. It’s quite foul!’

When Jack returned with their cups of coffee, they started planning her cover story.

‘I’ve had an idea,’ he said. ‘How about we say your translation services are needed to support French veterans? There are lots of the poor buggers stuck here after Dunkirk. They were evacuated with our boys and many of them are in a terrible way from what I hear. Lost limbs and will never walk again, but even worse is their mental state. They’re suffering from what used to be called shell shock. They call it battle fatigue now. The wounded soldiers are distraught, in poor health and many don’t know what’s become of their families in France since they surrendered. They’re all alone here.’

‘Oh, my goodness, that’s so sad,’ Lizzie said. ‘I didn’t know, but of course they wouldn’t go back to France now even if they were physically able.’

‘They’d be deported to a camp in Germany, or worse. And unless they fully recover, they won’t fight again.’

‘It sounds awful. Poor men. They must feel utterly lost.’

‘It’s just one of the horrendous outcomes of this war. There are displaced people all over Europe.’

‘Where are these French veterans?’

‘It would make sense to say you’re working in a nursing home. It would be in a country house somewhere. It must be far enough away that your family won’t pop over to see you, but feasible in that the veterans wouldn’t be housed in the flight path of the bombing raids.’

‘What would I translate?’

‘Some soldiers have a poor grasp of English, and they need support in French for rehabilitation. Filling in papers, making sure they understand what they’re doing and what’s happening with their health, that kind of thing.’

Lizzie nodded, her eyes brimming with tears.

‘What did I say?’

‘It’s not you. It sounds silly, but I actually want to go and help them. For a minute, I forgot this is only a fake job.’

Jack put his arms around Lizzie. ‘You are quite the loveliest. It’s not silly at all.’

Lizzie wiped her eyes on her cuff, and Jack produced a handkerchief from his pocket and offered it to her with a flourish .

‘Thank you,’ she said, sniffing and dabbing her eyes. ‘I don’t know what came over

me. Life can be so sad, it gets to you after a while, doesn't it?'

'It does indeed. I try not to think about the dark side of war too much, and just stay focused on the things we can do, but it's not always as simple as that.'

'Do the French veterans have people to help them with those things you mentioned?'

Jack's face softened, and Lizzie saw the compassion shining in his dark eyes. 'Yes, of course they do, darling. They are the ones who were rescued at Dunkirk, so I'm sure they count their lucky stars they're not rotting in a prison or labour camp.'

Lizzie's eyes brightened and her sadness lifted. 'Where will I say this nursing home is, then? I'd like to tell my family this evening if I can, so they have time to get used to the idea of me leaving again. They've been through a lot.'

Jack stood and walked over to the wall and pointed to the large map. 'Here, tell them you'll be based in a lovely old rambling country house in Oxfordshire, on the outskirts of Henley-on-Thames.'

'Has the army requisitioned it?' Lizzie asked, feeling her way into the cover story.

Jack nodded. 'Say you can't give them details as it's safer to keep the exact location a secret, but you'll write to them whilst you're away.'

'It sounds almost like a holiday. I sort of wish I was really going.'

'Henley-on-Thames is a beautiful town. I promise I'll take you when this is all over.'

'You have a lot of promises to keep, Raven. You said we'll go to France when the war is over too.'

‘I intend to keep all my promises, so you can look forward to lots of trips in the future.’

Lizzie beamed up at him. ‘I’m going to miss you so much,’ she said.

‘I’ll miss you too. Let’s not think about it now. We have until the end of next week together, so let’s make the most of it. In fact, let’s take a walk now. It’s work related, but I think you will love it.’

Lizzie and Jack strode at a fast pace along Baker Street, Lizzie doing her best to keep up with him, and Jack slowing as he remembered how fast he moved.

As they walked, they turned heads, both dashing in their smart uniforms.

Lizzie noticed how many admiring glances rested on Jack as they walked, and a little thrill surged in her chest as she thought how lucky she was that he was hers.

‘Where are we going?’ she said, her breath steaming in front of her face in the cold air.

‘You’ll see soon enough. It’s a surprise.’

Jack came to an abrupt stop in front of a tall building on Cavendish Street. ‘Here we are,’ he said. ‘I told you it wasn’t far.’

‘The library,’ Lizzie squealed. ‘What fun! I haven’t been in a library since I came to London.’

‘Then this is your chance,’ Jack said, enjoying Lizzie’s enthusiasm.

They wandered around the shelves stacked high with books.

‘Choose one,’ Jack said when they reached the French language section.

Lizzie looked puzzled. ‘What genre?’

‘Any book you want, the only caveat is it must be French!’

Understanding dawned in Lizzie’s eyes and she began poring over the shelves. Finally, her fingers reached for the spine of a novel on one of the higher shelves and she stretched to extract it from where it snuggled on the row of books.

‘Here, let me,’ said Jack, standing behind her and pulling the book down so she could fully grasp it.

His proximity affected Lizzie like it always did, and she turned slightly as their bodies touched. She saw the fire in his eyes, and she lay her hand on his arm.

‘Will you come over this evening after work or do you need to go home?’ he said.

‘Of course, I’ll come,’ she said, and they checked a French edition of *The Count of Monte Cristo* out of the library and headed back to Baker Street, their hands brushing occasionally as they walked side by side.

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Source Creation Date: August 11, 2025, 10:00 am

CHAPTER 6

Jack drove Lizzie to the airfield straight from Baker Street.

‘I’m glad you’re taking me,’ Lizzie said, reaching over to touch the back of his neck as they whizzed along the dark country roads. There was only a faint glimmer of the moon, draped in shadow, to light their way.

‘I sent the driver home. Gives us longer alone,’ he said, turning to look at her as he changed gears.

Lizzie’s stomach fluttered as her eyes met his and she gazed at his beloved face and dishevelled hair.

‘How on earth do you know where you’re going? We can barely see the road in front of us. I don’t know how you drive so fast,’ she said, not wanting to think about leaving him tonight.

‘We don’t want to flash our lights for the Jerries. You get used to driving in the blackout after a while, and we used this airfield a lot before the war, so I know the road well.’

Lizzie and Jack had become intimate despite such a relationship between agents being, at best, discouraged and, at worst, forbidden. They had spent a lot of time together and confessed their love for each other, but she was still in awe of him. He was twelve years her senior and sometimes the age gap seemed huge. Her youth made her feel gauche when it was obvious how much more experienced, he was in so

many ways.

‘I’ve only driven a bit in Jersey. Juliet taught me the basics, but I mostly rode my bicycle. I’d like to drive, but there hasn’t been the chance to practice with no car.’

‘You can drive me around and practice when you get back,’ Jack said, his melodic, deep voice resonating through her every cell.

Lizzie adored how he encouraged her to develop her skills and acted as though she could do anything. It was only a matter of putting her mind to it. She was starting to believe it, no matter what challenge arose.

‘Would you? That’s good of you! I didn’t even so much as pass a test yet, so you’d be taking your life in your hands!’

Jack smirked. ‘Don’t worry about that. Tests are suspended for the duration of the war, anyway. You’re in the perfect spot to drive with all the vehicles we have on hand at work.’

Most cars for personal use had been requisitioned for the war effort, and even if people were fortunate to still have one at their disposal, fuel was scarce and driving for leisure was frowned upon. Lizzie’s father either walked to work or relied on a driver who took him back and forth to the War Office.

Lizzie was grateful for the small talk to distract her from what lay ahead. She tried not to think about her impending jump out of a plane into the treacherous skies of Nazi-occupied France, but the fear hovered in her mind, no matter how she tried to push it away.

‘We can’t have agents roaming around who smoke but don’t know how to drive,’ he said, an indulgent smile on his lips .

‘I sort of got the hang of smoking, although I can’t say I like it very much.’ Lizzie chattered nervously, and her laughter pealed through the icy air in the car. ‘Brrrr, it’s freezing,’ she said, tucking her hands into her pockets.

‘You did well with the smoking. If anyone comments, say you only started recently.’ Jack winked at her and turned back to focus on the dark road ahead.

An owl hooted loudly, and Lizzie jumped.

‘Nervous?’ Jack asked, reaching for her hand.

Lizzie nodded and slipped her hand into his. The feel of his warm skin comforted her, and she held on tight as their fingers interlocked. ‘How are your hands not cold?’

‘Warm heart?’ Jack raised an eyebrow.

They looked at each other and laughed, which dispelled some of Lizzie’s nervousness.

‘We’ll be there soon,’ Jack said, after a few minutes of silence whilst he steered with one hand and Lizzie leaned against him.

‘Where did you stash the cash?’ Jack asked.

‘In a few places, to be on the safe side. I’ve never had so much money. Perhaps I’ll indulge in a haute couture shopping trip in Paris after the mission!’ Lizzie kept her tone light-hearted as they approached the airfield, but her heartbeat picked up speed until the echo thundered in her ears.

Each passing mile brought her closer to leaving, and trepidation weighed in her stomach like a heavy stone.

Jack had switched into operation mode and was focused on the mission. ‘Give some money to Hannah and keep the rest yourself so you have a reserve in case of an emergency. You’ll no doubt need money to fund the ongoing network activities if it continues to expand.’

‘What about Pierre and Camille?’ Their Resistance contacts in Reims were on her mind because she would see them when she landed, all going to plan .

‘No, don’t worry about them. They get supplies and cash from the frequent drops. It’s more difficult to reach Hannah and the Liberty Network in Paris.’

‘Alright,’ Lizzie nodded. ‘What constitutes an emergency, though?’

‘There are many scenarios, but let’s say you are stopped, and they don’t approve your papers. You may be able to pay them off, especially if they’re a French official of some sort.’

‘Are the Nazis incorruptible, then?’

Jack’s sudden laughter was like a shotgun and made Lizzie jump again. ‘They are already thoroughly corrupted by Hitler’s regime, but my sources tell me most of them are too indoctrinated and committed to the cause to be easily bought, whereas French officials might be on the fence and only collaborating because they’re too afraid to refuse. Or they are just plain greedy, which works in our favour.’

‘I see,’ Lizzie said, her stomach tightening at the thought of having to bribe officials. ‘I am way out of my depth,’ she said, her voice lowering to a tiny whisper.

‘Here we are,’ said Jack, spinning the wheel and bringing their conversation to a halt.

Once the guard had checked Jack’s papers, the barrier swung open, and the car slid

into the unmarked airfield. The wheels rumbled along a bumpy track until they came to an abrupt stop.

‘It’s the same airfield I flew from last time,’ Lizzie said.

Jack nodded. ‘It doesn’t do to know too much about it, so there are no signs. Can’t risk the Luftwaffe getting their hands on this location or they’ll hammer it in their bombing campaigns.’

Lizzie saw the hazy outline of the camouflaged Lysander, visible in the moonlight's glow through the windscreen.

‘You will be spectacular,’ Jack said, his voice loud and confident. ‘Just like you were last time. Remember, whenever you are behind enemy lines, you must follow your instincts and live by your wits. Don’t trust anyone if it doesn’t feel right. You are a natural at this and you know what to do.’

Lizzie’s eyes bored into Jack’s, and she swallowed. This was their last moment together, completely alone. Tears threatened to spill from her eyes, and her throat swelled with a tidal wave of emotion. She blinked hard. This was no time to fall apart, even though the last thing she wanted to do was leave Jack. Her courage had fled now the plane awaited, and she felt small and scared.

What had she been thinking agreeing to go back into occupied France? And not just France, but Paris—the playground of German soldiers on leave, home to Gestapo HQ on the Avenue Foch and German High Command, to name but a few...

Jack lifted her hand to his lips in the privacy of the dark car. ‘Go safely, Seagrove, my darling. Message me like we arranged—I’ll be waiting at the agreed times. Always remember, I’m watching over you every step of the way.’

Jack got out of the car and came around to open the door for Lizzie. He extracted her case from the back, and for a few blissful seconds, the heat of his body melded into hers as they swayed against each other. His fingers caressed her cheek, and she drew a sharp intake of breath. As he moved back slightly, he whispered, 'I love you. Take care and come back to me soon. I'll be waiting for you.'

'I love you too,' Lizzie whispered, and a ragged breath ripped through her chest and her lip trembled.

They walked side by side towards an airfield hut and an RAF sergeant emerged to greet them.

'Good evening,' said Jack. 'This is your brave passenger for tonight's run.'

The sergeant offered them a cuppa, and they accepted gratefully after the long day of preparation and the night drive. Lizzie climbed into the bulky jumpsuit that awaited her on the bench and Jack helped her slip the helmet on.

'Remember, you don't need to put this on until you're about to jump, but let's make sure it fits.'

Lizzie rested her hand on Jack's as he buckled the helmet. 'I wish you were coming with me like you did on my first mission.'

'Me too, but it would be too obvious if I did. I don't accompany anyone else on their flights.'

'Why did you accompany me on my first flight, then?' Lizzie asked.

'I think we both know the answer to that. From the moment we met, I couldn't stay away from you. I had to know you were ready and so I came along. If something had

gone wrong on that jump, I would never have forgiven myself.'

'And now you would forgive yourself?' Lizzie teased.

'God forbid, no, of course not. But you're more experienced now and you know what to do. The pilot will take good care of you, and the reception committee will be waiting for you. Besides, you were the first female agent we sent into France from England, on your first mission, and you had to drop in and find your own way to the safe house alone. It was a lot of firsts.'

'It was terrifying,' Lizzie said, remembering that night and shivering spontaneously, but the reminder that their friends would meet her in Reims allayed her fears and instantly she felt less anxious.

The sergeant indicated it was time for her to board the plane.

'Lizzie back in the Lizzie,' said Jack, with his charming smile.

She sensed he was putting on a brave face for the moment of their separation .

The Lysander engine whirred louder. 'You'd better climb aboard,' Jack said, squeezing her hand one last time and then releasing it reluctantly.

Lizzie felt his eyes drilling into her back as she walked towards the plane like a prisoner approaching the noose. Once aboard, she turned briefly to wave to him. For a second, time stood still, and the world disappeared. The lovers were transfixed, like magnets perpetually drawn to each other through a universal law.

Then Lizzie disappeared into the plane and lost sight of him, as she fought to hold back the tears.

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Source Creation Date: August 11, 2025, 10:00 am

CHAPTER 7

Lizzie perched on the hard seat in the plane, every sinew of her body rigid with anticipation of what was to come. Her mind whirled with thoughts of Jack and how she would not see his face or feel his arms around her for weeks or even months, depending how the mission went.

She should be emotionally prepared for this.

He had warned her countless times about the dangers of agents getting involved, but she had fallen for him, nonetheless.

Images of their time together over the winter and how they had spent every possible moment in each other's company clawed at her heart and she felt bereft.

Her melancholic reverie was interrupted when the navigator called out that it was nearly time. They were almost at the low altitude point where she would have to hurl herself into the Reims sky. She had learnt from previous jumps that they flew low to minimise the risk of being spotted and shot down by the Luftwaffe.

The little plane bounced and groaned as it dropped lower, and the seat shifted beneath her, and she almost slid onto the floor. Her helmet was back on, and now she stood up shakily, wishing she was safely in bed with Jack fast asleep. The navigator reached over to clip her parachute strap to the static line overhead.

In some ways, it would be easier to jump without Jack watching her on the plane. Leaving him was always the toughest part. She summoned a watery smile for the man

who was risking his life to drop her into the hands of the Resistance in the middle of the night.

Trust the process. She repeated the instruction over and over in her mind like a mantra while she waited. She knew the parachute should do its job because she had experienced it before, but ice raced through her veins at the sheer terror of rocketing through enemy skies and knowing the aircraft could be shot down at any second.

Then she entered a dreamlike state as the flap swung open, and the navigator began the countdown.

‘10, 9, 8 ...’

The bitter January night winds battered the plane and rushed into her face.

‘7, 6, 5 ...’

It was time. He gave her the nod, and she approached the edge, her heart banging so hard she felt dizzy.

‘Jump,’ he shouted, waving his hand as he finished the countdown.

Lizzie drew on the tiny slice of courage she had left and threw herself out of the flap. There were eerie shadows in the sky cast by the light of the moon and as she plummeted through the cold air, she glimpsed light below.

There was barely time to think before her chute jerked open.

Thank God.

She struggled to take a breath and gasped as her feet collided with the ground. The

silk chute crumpled around her as the frosty grass tickled her fingers, and she rolled to one side to free herself.

Lizzie looked up into the sky and saw the Lysander disappearing on the horizon in a hasty retreat. Her connection with London was severed. There was no turning back now.

The new mission was on, and a surge of excitement overtook the sadness that had gripped her since she said goodbye to Jack.

Muffled voices and hovering lights grew closer. A hand appeared in front of her face, and she heard a familiar voice. She squinted in the torchlight and Jack's dear old friend, Pierre, whom she had grown so fond of, leaned down, and she jumped up, holding onto his rough hand.

'Welcome back,' he said, a warm smile creasing his weatherworn face under his farmer's cap.

'Ah, it's so good to see you,' Lizzie said, her voice low. She looked around and saw the rest of the small reception committee, who formed a torch-lit circle around her like a safety net.

The plane had dropped some supplies before she jumped and now, the Resistance members scattered to gather the boxes and stash them in Pierre's old truck.

Lizzie cast her eyes around to get her bearings in the dim light. This looked like the same pasture she had been picked up from before, but she couldn't be sure. The trees and foliage were sparse and coated in snow and France was frozen in the depths of winter.

Pierre returned to her side after organising his truck. 'Are you alright? A smooth

landing and no injuries?’

She noticed he didn’t use her real name or even the cover name she had used on the previous mission. It was wise. Names led to people being killed, and besides, she had a new cover name now that she would share with him and his wife, Camille, if appropriate, when they were safely in the farmhouse. Lizzie was only here for one night, so there was no reason to share her name with other members of the Resistance. All it took for a name to be on the lips of the Gestapo was for one of them to break under torture, and search parties would hunt for them all over Reims.

Lizzie nodded. ‘I’m fine, thank you. Shall I bury my gear here?’

Pierre beckoned for her to follow him, and soon they were in the dark corner of a woodland copse. In the soft light of the torch, she watched him brush some thick branches aside to reveal a hatch, which he opened.

‘Let’s hide them in here. The parachutes and suits are too incriminating to keep burying in the fields. It’s safer to store them here, and we may even be able to use them again or repurpose the material. Who knows what supplies we’ll need in the future if this war drags on?’

Lizzie stripped her canvas suit off to reveal the French custom-tailored dress she had been measured for at Baker Street. The SOE took no chances. Everything she wore or had on her person was made in France or looked as though it had been.

‘Did you find my stuff?’ Lizzie asked, hoping she could get her coat as the blasts of cold air made her miss the warm suit.

‘Yes, I believe so. We’ve gathered everything from the drop and it’s in the truck. Let us make haste and get back to the farm whilst we’re still covered by the curfew.’

Lizzie thought it ironic that the Germans enforced the curfew to keep the locals off the streets after nightfall, but the Resistance used it as a protective cloak to carry out their clandestine operations.

‘How have you been keeping?’ Pierre asked as the truck rumbled along the track toward the farmhouse, where Lizzie would stay for the rest of her first night back on French soil.

‘I’ve been fine, thank you. We’ve thought about you so much. Jack said to tell you that you are doing an incredible job.’

‘You have both been in our thoughts, too. How is Raven doing?’ asked Pierre.

‘He is well. We’re still diving in and out of the shelters with the daily bombs on London, but somehow or other Londoners keep going with their lives. It’s amazing, really. No one would have believed this kind of continuous barrage was possible, but there it is.’

‘Those damned Boche,’ Pierre hissed. ‘I’ve heard they are still pounding London. We’re fortunate in that respect here, I suppose. It’s too packed with Germans and collaborators to target. It’s just a shame we have to stomach the bastards swanning around like they own France.’

The reminder that she was now surrounded by Nazis spiked Lizzie’s fears, and adrenaline rushed through her. The outline of the farmhouse in the moonlight rose in front of them like a mirage as the truck bounced along.

‘I wish these were better times, but your home is such a comforting sight. I’ve missed you and Camille.’

‘We’ve missed you, too. Camille was thrilled when we got the message you were

coming to stay with us.’

‘At least we can communicate now,’ Lizzie said. ‘Remember we couldn’t message at all when we were here last?’

‘Yes, thanks to you and Jack for getting the Reims Resistance back into action. We’re fully operational and at a much higher level than before.’

‘And, thanks to you for taking over the running of the network. We couldn’t do any of this without you. Jack said I should tell you that and make sure you understand just how grateful we all are.’

‘You’re very kind. The truth is, we don’t have any choice. We won’t just lie down and die while these devils destroy our country—and the world if they have their way.’

‘Thank God for the Resistance,’ Lizzie said.

‘I’m not sure what role God plays in this madness,’ Pierre said wryly, shaking his head. ‘It makes you wonder.’

‘It does,’ Lizzie said, who had wondered the same.

The truck came to a wheezing stop and Lizzie saw Camille in the faint light of the farmhouse doorway. She leapt out of the truck and rushed into the older woman’s outstretched arms.

Camille enveloped Lizzie’s slight frame, and they hugged tightly. ‘Welcome back, beautiful girl. I can’t tell you how happy I am to see you. But come in out of this freezing cold. You’re shivering. We’ve kept the kitchen warm for your arrival.’

Lizzie beamed at Camille as she ushered her inside, and Pierre followed with her case.

‘Is this one yours?’ he asked when she was seated at the kitchen table.

‘Yes, it’s just my personal items. I wanted to bring a new wireless for the Paris network, but it would be too conspicuous on the train.’

‘You’re right. It would,’ Pierre said. ‘At least if they search you, they won’t find anything linking you to England. If they found you travelling with a radio, I don’t want to think what they would do.’

Lizzie remembered a similar conversation with Jack when she had asked if she should take a new wireless set to Hannah.

‘I’ll put this in your room, so you’ve got your things for when you go up,’ Pierre said, pointing to her battered brown case.

‘Thank you,’ Lizzie said.

‘Drink this to warm your bones.’ Camille placed a hot cup of tea on the table for Lizzie, who wrapped her freezing hands around it and basked in the warmth.

When Pierre returned to the kitchen, his wife poured him a cup of tea, and Lizzie saw a joyful smile pass between them.

They were such a well-matched couple, and their home was filled with love. Lizzie hoped that one day she and Jack would live in such harmony together. Pierre and Camille were thrust into the horror of an evil regime, but it hadn’t dimmed the warmth in their hearts.

Lizzie drank her tea, and the fear gradually ebbed from her, as a comforting weariness took over.

‘You must be exhausted,’ Camille said, reading her body language. ‘Your room is ready. Would you like me to take you up now, chérie ? I’m dying to hear all your news, but it’ll wait until morning.’

Lizzie nodded sleepily and rose from the wooden chair as Camille led the way out of the warm kitchen and up the stairs.

Camille removed piles of bedding and towels from the shelves and pushed hard until the wood swung into the hollow of the wall and revealed the entrance to a secret room. Lizzie followed her in, and her eyes scanned the made-up bed and the sink in the small space. A lamp cast a dim light, just enough for them to see their way, and Lizzie noticed her case on the floor nearby.

‘We’d all better try to get some sleep. It’s almost morning,’ Camille said, pointing to the tiny window covered by a thin blackout curtain that showed the promise of the pale dawn light dancing around the scrappy edges.

After they bid each other good night, Lizzie opened her case and fumbled about in the contents. She grappled to take off her dress and, after pulling her nightie over her head, she cleaned her teeth in a cursory fashion. A wave of sheer exhaustion overcame her, and she climbed under the covers, sank into the mattress and fell into a deep sleep.

Her last thought before surrendering to a blissful slumber was a memory of curling into Jack when they shared this bed last summer and fell in love.

CHAPTER 8

Jack stood in the airfield watching the Lysander fade away in the hazy sky towards France until all he could glimpse was a faint outline.

Lizzie was gone and his heart hurt.

He told himself he'd watched her leave several times before and she had come back to him then.

Faith. He must have faith that all would be well. He had put on a good show of bravado for Lizzie. They were in love, but he was also her commanding officer, and she needed him strong, not dewy eyed like a lovesick schoolboy.

Jack could have kicked himself when it was time for her to board, and he got all mushy. Letting his feelings for her consume him was no use to anyone, and certainly not to her.

Against his better judgement, they were dropping her right into the devil's lair, and she needed to be at her sharpest and brightest.

It was heart-wrenching. He couldn't let her go without her knowing he loved her more than life itself, but they also needed to be strong, or they wouldn't get through this damned war .

The mission must come first now. If the Allies didn't win, it would be the end of civilisation as they knew it. All sense of humanity and goodness would be lost with

the defeat, which was why he willingly answered Churchill's rallying cries to defend their island against evil foe.

But who was he kidding? The mission had come first for as long as he could remember. He had joined the intelligence service in his first year at Oxford. Instead of smoking on the lawn and passing his student days in a haze of parties and girls, he spied on suspected communists and passed secret messages to Military Intelligence.

Jack fired up the engine and left the airfield. His mind flickered back to the day Val recruited him. He had been an innocent young man with no sense of what was at stake, but something about her words had stirred him.

'Your name came up several times as someone I should speak to,' Val had said. She was smartly dressed in a skirt and blazer and cut an imposing figure, with her hat perched on her head at a jaunty angle.

'Valerie Jones.' She introduced herself with a firm handshake.

'Jack King,' he had replied, wondering what this mysterious woman wanted with him.

Was she a friend of his mother's keeping an eye on him?

Even as the thought crossed his mind, he knew that wasn't it. There was something far too professional about this woman for her to be just checking on a friend's son at university.

'What can I do for you?' Jack had inquired politely, smoothing his shirt sleeves to his wrists.

Val turned to check the door was closed. 'Take a seat, Jack. I have something

important to talk to you about.'

They only talked for about fifteen minutes. She told him that his country needed him. His bilingual skills were an asset that Military Intelligence desperately needed in these times.

Jack sighed at the memory. He had been so naive in those days—a boy of just nineteen. The year was 1927, and Europe was still recovering from the Great War. Val didn't divulge more than he needed to know, but gradually, over time and during their regular meetings, she trained him in the art of tradecraft and the secrets of espionage. He was fascinated and found he had a knack for keeping secrets and getting people to divulge information that they would not ordinarily divulge.

When he graduated from Oxford with first class honours, Val was in the audience. It meant a lot to him she had come because they had grown close, and he respected her. She was like a second very stern mother, which, considering he was fatherless, was a welcome support through his time at university.

After the graduation ceremony, his mother and Henry took him for a celebratory dinner in town and Val disappeared into the crowd, but not before arranging to meet him the following day for lunch.

After they'd both ordered fish and she surprised him by drinking beer like him, she got right down to business.

'We've had fun, and you've helped us considerably over the past few years. The agency is grateful for all you have done. I am grateful,' she said. 'You've made my job easier, and it's been seamless working with you. Thank you, Jack.'

She raised her glass and congratulated him on his graduation.

Jack nodded solemnly, drinking his beer and wondering if this was where his days of playing espionage games were at an end. His role had largely been watching and listening to key people of influence both at the university and at various clubs and organisations in town. Academics of all nationalities adored Oxford, and the town buzzed with new and returning visitors. Guided by Val, he had gathered a lot of intelligence, and she always had another job for him.

In truth, it had been fun. He had learned how to read people, and his people skills would see him in good stead for whatever career he pursued. He had chosen a new degree in Philosophy, Politics and Economics, which, on reflection, may have been the reason Val approached him in the first place. He'd never asked whether she had other spies at Oxford, but he presumed she might.

From the beginning, she had warned him of the dangers of loose lips, and he had never divulged any secret information to anyone other than Val when he reported back to her.

Jack King had a strict code of honour and had impressed Val simply by being himself. She had recruited the right man for the job, and she mentored him carefully.

'I won't beat around the bush any longer,' Val said, fixing her stare on Jack.

He almost laughed because no one would accuse Val of beating around the bush. She meant business—anyone could see that.

He cleared his throat and looked at her expectantly.

'The service wants you full-time. You excel at this work, and we need you on board permanently. I'm here today to officially invite you to become an employee of Military Intelligence.'

And that was how his dabbling in secrets at Oxford had developed into a full-time career in espionage. His mother still didn't know exactly what he did, but of course, she had her suspicions.

Recently, he had been promoted and now wore a captain's uniform. In wartime, it was too obvious he was in the Secret Service if he didn't have a military rank to blur the edges of what he did .

His mother knew not to ask many questions about his work.

It was almost dawn, and he calculated Lizzie should have landed by now and with any luck, she'd be at the farmhouse. His heart missed a beat at the thought of where she might be if things hadn't gone smoothly.

He reminded himself, there was no place for sinister thoughts, or he'd drive himself insane. This was probably going to be a long mission, and he must steel himself to not see or hear from her every day.

Jack took a deep breath to calm himself and turned into his street. The car slid to a stop outside the entrance to his flat. He would try to grab a few hours' sleep before going into Baker Street.

His body was weary, but his mind ran wild with images of Lizzie, the Resistance, and what might happen in the coming days. He could feel the fear in his stomach at the genuine possibility he may lose her. They might never see each other again if things went wrong. Today she would travel to Paris to find Hannah, and the danger had never felt more vivid. He preferred to put himself in danger than be left behind.

Jack would trade places with Lizzie in a second. He wished it was him who had just landed in Reims and who would join the Liberty Network to support Hannah in her new operation.

But it was a job for a woman. The SOE had made that clear, and he knew it was the right decision, even though he hated it. There were times his going back into occupied France might be fitting, but this wasn't one of them. He could be there only for brief trips, and this was an undercover operation where Lizzie would need to blend in with the locals and learn from Hannah so she could replace her in some of her network activities.

Jack lay his head on his pillow and turned to one side to try to fall asleep. His face touched the cotton and Lizzie's scent was all around him, wafting up his nose and making him almost sick with longing.

Usually, he always expected the best, but this scenario plagued him with doubt. He couldn't help thinking how ironic it would be if after all these years when he refused to fall in love, and only dated casually, he had lost his heart to the most amazing woman, and now she might be lost to him forever because of this war.

The worst of it was he blamed himself. He had recruited her.

If anything went wrong, it would be all his fault.

Jack tossed and turned, unable to do more than doze for a few minutes at a time. If only he could get a message from Pierre to confirm she had landed safely and was with them. That would be too risky though, and he would need to come to terms with living in the unknown until he heard from her.

Lizzie's face lingered in his mind and in a light dream he saw her talking about the veterans in Henley and asking if someone was taking care of them. It had touched him more than he had let on. It was only a cover story, but she had taken it to heart and was ready to go to the fictional nursing home to make sure the French soldiers were well.

Finally, Jack drifted off into a deeper sleep and he dreamt of better days. He saw himself walking hand in hand with Lizzie through the streets of London, laughing and making plans for their future.

When he awoke, the sense of loss rolled through him and the pain in his gut was visceral.

CHAPTER 9

Occupied France, January 1941

Lizzie cycled to the train station in Reims. Pierre had wanted to drop her nearby in his truck, but she insisted on going alone, so she didn't draw attention to the local network.

She saw the regret in his eyes, but there was resignation too. Pierre knew it was for the best, so she borrowed the bicycle she had used on her last visit. He strapped her case to the back of the bicycle, and after saying goodbye to Camille and Pierre, she had set off with a wave over her shoulder.

Camille had tears in her eyes when they parted and had hugged Lizzie so tight, it had made her tearful too. She told Lizzie she was welcome to stay with them any time. 'I look forward to when we won't need to hide you, but until that magical day comes, there will always be a bed for you in the secret room.'

Lizzie cycled along the track. Reims looked so different in winter. There was a light frost covering the ground, and she burrowed into her coat as the morning winds chilled her face.

Gone were the plump grapes swaying on the vines, ready to be harvested and gone were the breathtaking views and flowering hedges. Everything looked shrivelled and brown rather than lush and green. Reims was in hibernation, and it was hard to equate this cold, barren land with the stunning landscape of the previous summer.

She had worn light dresses then, and now she was covered from head to foot in heavy clothing. The bicycle wheels whizzed across the country tracks until she turned onto a back road that Pierre had marked for her on a map as the safest route to the station. The beautiful Reims cathedral she had visited on her first mission was on the other side of town, and she wasn't familiar with this area.

Her pulse raced as she saw the imposing pale stone building appear before her against the crisp blue sky. Reims was a small city, and it was easy to get around.

Camille and Pierre were such good people, and she had been sorry to say goodbye so soon, but her mission was in Paris, not Reims.

Jack and Val had discussed the possibility of dropping her on the outskirts of Paris and decided it was too dangerous. They said there would be some risk of her being stopped on the journey from Reims, but it was ultimately a safer plan.

Lizzie looked about her for the spot where Pierre had asked her to leave the bicycle. He would pick it up in his truck later, after he checked no one was monitoring the area. All these little moves were a lot of effort, but she was learning fast that it was the little moves that could mean the difference between life and death.

She shivered, partly from the cold and partly from the fear that crawled over her skin as she saw clusters of German soldiers and French police around the station.

Jack's words rang in her head. 'They will be alert for anything out of the ordinary. Stations are one of the key places they look for agents. Don't give them anything strange to notice. Take careful, slow movements and breathe so you look calm. No running or rushing. That catches the eye, and they'll stop you just for the sake of it.'

Breathe...

Her first step was complete. She'd reached the station without being stopped and had left the bicycle as instructed. She had done her best to act as if she was an ordinary young French woman leaving it for when she returned later, and so far, no one had paid any attention to her.

Lizzie took several steady breaths as she entered the station. Her heart thudded, but she breathed through it as her heels clip-clopped on the hard floor and she scanned the platform, seeking her contact.

The train was due soon, and she was losing hope of getting her ticket in time, when a young woman approached and greeted her like a close friend. She held out a cigarette to Lizzie, who smoothly extracted the ticket wedged beneath the packet and accepted a cigarette for later.

Jack had explained Pierre would arrange for a local contact to buy the ticket in advance as a precaution so she wouldn't leave a trail. It seemed surreal that people could just buy train tickets as usual, when in every other way occupied France was like a Nazi prison. The train was due in about ten minutes, and Lizzie waited on the platform. No one had stopped her to check her papers, but she had them ready in case someone wanted to see her permission to travel.

German soldiers patrolled the station, and she did her best to blend in. No looking around, no eye contact. She was as invisible as she could make herself, and when she heard the distant rat-a-tat-tat of the train and its wheels clattered into the station, relief flooded through her, and she had to hold herself up on her weak limbs.

There were several other women waiting, and she boarded the train in the middle of the queue to be as inconspicuous as possible. Finding a seat in a compartment with just one other woman who had her head in a book, she sat and gazed out of the window.

One step closer.

God willing, the journey would be smooth and in a couple of hours, she would be in Paris looking for Hannah.

The train was delayed for no obvious reason, and Lizzie watched as more people filed onto the train and passed their compartment. Fortunately, no one else joined them and the woman was still pre-occupied with her book.

The train chugged to life as it hissed and jerked out of the station. Lizzie sat there unmoving, barely believing she was on her way to Paris.

Only yesterday afternoon she had been holed up in Jack's flat, and they had made passionate love. There was something almost desperate in the way they had touched each other, as if they both knew it could be the last time.

Their fate wasn't in their hands. All Lizzie could do was follow her orders and implement them to the best of her ability. And all Jack could do was wait for news from her, his agent, and the woman who had captured his heart.

They had lain on his bed, their warm limbs entangled and covered by a blanket to keep out the winter chill. 'We're in an impossible situation, my darling,' he had whispered to her, and she heard the heartbreak echo in his voice.

When they first met, she would never have guessed he could be so tender and romantic. Back then, he had seemed like a bit of a brute, but underneath his tough exterior was a gentleness and passion that spoke directly to her soul .

She had read a book about soul mates and how they were connected through time and space and could feel each other's presence no matter where they were physically. Sitting on the train in occupied France, the thought that she could feel Jack's presence

gave her strength. He said he was her raven, always watching over her, and now she had to trust that she would find her way back to him.

Lizzie tightened her coat around her and smoothed the woollen material over her legs as the train rumbled to a stop and the cold air seeped under the crack of the compartment door.

Her hand froze on her knee when she heard loud voices speaking in German. A Nazi officer's face peered through the window and her senses reeled as she watched in slow motion as his manicured hand opened the door and he entered the compartment.

'Bonjour, madame,' said the officer, his voice cultured and smooth.

As he spoke, Lizzie saw his eyes flicker to the hand that rested on her knee. The narrow gold band on her ring finger had done the trick. On her last mission, she had run into serious trouble and Val had suggested her cover this time should be that of a married woman.

'Do you think the Germans care whether a woman is married if they want her?' Lizzie asked Jack, one afternoon when he walked her home through Regent's Park.

'Some do, I imagine. Many don't. But it can only help give you an extra layer of protection. And if they don't care, it won't matter either way.'

It was settled. She would pose as a married woman and on further questioning she would say she hadn't heard from her husband for months but believed him to still be in a labour camp. It wasn't a perfect cover story, but it would have to do .

Lizzie guessed the officer who had just entered was in his thirties. He was tall, blond and good looking, and he fixed his gaze on her and tried to engage her in conversation.

‘It’s a fine day, madame, is it not?’

Lizzie nodded politely and looked towards the other woman who sat opposite them, but she kept her head firmly in her book and the officer showed no interest in her.

‘Do you live in Paris?’ he probed, undeterred by Lizzie’s unenthusiastic response.

‘I am going to stay with my sister,’ Lizzie said, her heart thudding as she fought to maintain her composure. She reasoned it could be seen as quite normal for a French woman to show discomfort around a Nazi officer. It wasn’t like they had been invited to take over France.

The officer took the hint and fell silent.

The panic in Lizzie’s chest gradually subsided, and she breathed normally again as she looked out the window at the snowy banks passing by in a blur.

It was bad luck to be sharing a compartment with an officer, but Val and Jack had prepared her for every scenario. Lizzie rehearsed her cover story in her mind, ready for the real thing.

After a few minutes, she turned to discreetly look at the officer. She needn’t have worried, his head lay at an angle against the seat, and he had fallen asleep to the hum of the train.

Lizzie let herself relax. The weariness of the previous night and lack of sleep was catching up with her. Terror had spiked her energy, but it drained out of her just as quickly when she saw he didn’t pose an immediate threat.

Just as she was getting comfortable and settling back against the seat to make the most of the quiet time before reaching Paris, the train ground to an abrupt halt. Once

again, she heard loud voices and this time, she saw German soldiers running onto the train. Lizzie could barely breathe.

Had they been tipped off she was on the train and come to arrest her? She sat rigid with fear, but doing her best not to show it on her face.

The officer awoke and stood to look through the door. After a few minutes, he disappeared into the corridor and Lizzie sat there clutching the seat.

The older woman opposite her cast her a sympathetic look. 'Don't worry, they check the trains like this often. As long as you have nothing to hide, you'll be fine.'

Lizzie attempted a half-smile but it was more like a wince. She had everything to hide, and the woman's observation only increased the panic spiralling through her.

The officer re-entered the compartment. 'A routine check,' he said, his voice reassuring as he looked at Lizzie.

It didn't stop Lizzie's heart drumming, and she sat there praying inwardly that the soldiers would abandon the train and leave them in peace. It felt like forever, but then the door swung open again and two soldiers entered.

Lizzie listened carefully to the officer and understood enough to know he asked the soldiers what they were looking for.

One of them replied with a mutter, and turned away as he spoke, so she couldn't make out the meaning of his words.

She stopped breathing as he stretched upwards and hauled her case off the overhead shelf.

‘Whose is this?’ he asked in guttural German.

Lizzie thought it best to act as though she didn’t understand, so she looked at him as though she was curious about what he was doing with her case.

The officer translated for her patiently. ‘He’s asking whose case this is. Is it yours, madame?’

In a polite voice, Lizzie replied it was .

The officer nodded to the soldier, who had already laid it on the ground between the seats and was tugging the zip. The officer exited the compartment and left her to the mercy of the soldiers.

This is what you were trained for. You are ready for situations like these, she reminded herself.

The older woman caught her eye and winked discreetly.

The soldier ripped open the case and rifled through the contents. Lizzie held her breath as she watched him. His fingers touched her clothing, and he held up a pair of silky French underwear and smirked. The other soldier laughed and joined in, pawing through her clothes. The second soldier’s hands found her novel, pulled it out of the case and read in a mock exaggerated French accent.

Lizzie sat there seething, but she knew she must not rise to the bait. She had to act like an ordinary young French woman with nothing to hide and who wasn’t trained to kill with her bare hands.

She coughed and looked at the soldier. ‘It’s my sister’s favourite novel. She’s been unwell and I’m taking it to her in Paris.’

The soldier leered like he was undressing her with his eyes, and for a second Lizzie thought she might be in real danger. Then the door opened, and the officer joined them again.

‘Come on, boys. You can see there’s nothing sinister here. No point upsetting the lady.’

One soldier looked chastened and the other who had been reading her copy of *Le Comte de Monte Cristo*, tossed it back into the case and shoved it towards her with his foot. They both turned to leave, but the officer called them to attention.

‘I said that is no way to treat a lady. Pick up her belongings and place the case back where you found it,’ he commanded.

The soldier who had read her book, flushed pink and looked humiliated. The other bent to follow the officer’s instructions and within two minutes, the case was back on the shelf, and the two turned to the officer and saluted Heil Hitler.

The train was quiet again, and the officer looked over at Lizzie. ‘I can only apologise for that ungentlemanly behaviour. I hope you have not been too inconvenienced.’

Lizzie smiled graciously and assured him she hadn’t. She didn’t want to encourage him so didn’t risk any further conversation, and turned her head to look out the window, her heart slowly resuming its steady beat.

CHAPTER 10

The train finally lurched into the station and Lizzie looked out of the window and saw the Paris sky was surprisingly bright for this time of year. The officer had slipped out of the compartment and left the train at an earlier stop. She had breathed a sigh of relief and the older woman sitting opposite her smiled knowingly, as though they shared a secret.

Now they both stood to leave the train and parted without saying another word to each other. The silent mutual understanding was all that passed between them.

Lizzie adjusted her beret and checked her coat pockets for her forged identity papers for what must have been the tenth time on the journey. It would be a disaster if she lost them. The rolls of paper francs brushing against her skin reassured her that the money was safe, and so she stretched to retrieve her case and followed the woman out of the external door and onto the platform.

The air was freezing, and the bright blue sky held a deceptive promise it couldn't keep. Lizzie knotted her woollen scarf tighter around her neck and buttoned up the collar on her coat.

She wished she could have brought her lucky yellow scarf she had worn during her first missions, but Jack had been adamant it would be a dangerous move. Marie LeClair was gone, along with her elaborate cover story, and there would be no lucky yellow scarf with Lizzie this time.

She prayed the luck would accompany her and she would get out alive, but as she

walked along the concourse with purposeful steps that were neither fast nor slow, she had no regrets. The sharp pangs of sadness at leaving Jack so abruptly the previous evening had softened, and she clicked into mission mode.

Her fierce love and tender feelings for him must be locked away for now, or she would struggle to operate. This was no time or place for lovesick daydreams and self-indulgence. She knew what she was here to do—or at least—she knew she was here for Hannah to show her what to do. Hannah was the leader of the Liberty Network and now Lizzie was back in the field, terror-tinged excitement surged through her and she was alert. This is what she had been trained for and she suspected this was the true purpose of her moving to London. What had seemed like being forced into fleeing Jersey before the Nazis invaded, she now viewed more as an opportunity to serve her country in a way she could never have done if she'd stayed on the island.

And then there was Jack, of course. His face loomed in her mind and her emotions tangled with her steely resolve.

But no, she sighed impatiently and firmly pushed the feelings aside again. She must draw on her inner strength and be ready for any eventuality. If there was one thing she had learnt in her relatively short time as an agent, it was that anything could happen when you were in occupied territory, and she couldn't afford to let her guard down .

Jack had explained to her that one reason Military Intelligence discouraged agents from becoming romantically involved was because they endangered their lives as well as each other's. 'Your thinking must be unemotional and crystal clear if you are to make the best decisions for the mission, and judgement is too easily clouded when you are in love with another agent.'

'Arrête mademoiselle,' a voice stopped Lizzie in her tracks as she headed towards the exit, aiming to blend seamlessly into the crowd, congratulating herself on reaching

Paris unhindered.

But it was not to be.

She cast an inquiring look at the French policeman, as if she had no idea why he might stop her.

‘Papers,’ he said in a superior tone, his eyes aloof.

Lizzie slipped her hand into her pocket and pulled out her identification papers.

The seamstress had sewn fresh papers into Lizzie’s coat lining for her to take to Hannah. Forging experts had pored over the documents to make them as authentic as possible. Part of Lizzie’s mission was to pay attention to what changes had happened with the Nazi laws and bureaucracy in Paris, so she could pass the details to Baker Street, and they could produce the updated documents.

Lizzie assumed a demure expression whilst the official checked her papers, but her heart pounded, and she felt weak.

Stay calm. You are an ordinary young French woman.

‘Purpose of your visit to Paris?’ he asked, his voice holding an edge of menace.

Lizzie swallowed. Her throat was dry. ‘I’m here to visit my sister. She’s been unwell and is recuperating.’

The policeman continued studying her document, and she wondered what was going through his mind. Did he get a sick pleasure from stopping women from going where they wished to go? Did he get rewarded for catching people out on minor discrepancies in their papers?

She held her breath, waiting to see if the papers would pass his careful inspection.

Lizzie had placed her life in the hands of the agency, and she trusted them implicitly. She knew Jack and Val had done everything they could to get her mission-ready, but things changed frequently and who knew if these papers reflected the German regime's latest procedures in Paris? There were different regulations and statutes in the various occupied territories, and it was difficult to keep up with them.

Lizzie's chest felt like it might explode as she stood waiting. Surely, she wouldn't be stopped so early on her mission, before she'd even got the chance to talk to Hannah. The streets of Paris were just beyond the station door, calling to her.

Slowly the policeman returned her papers, raising his eyes to look at her, and then he stood aside to allow her to pass.

'Have a pleasant trip, madame.'

Her fingers curled around the papers, and she thanked him, careful not to show her contempt of the Nazi collaborator.

She was only twenty-one, and he had presumed she was unmarried initially, but her papers were having the desired effect. He had automatically treated her with more deference as a married woman. It was a subconscious social habit. Thank goodness Jack had insisted on a new cover name. Not for the first time, she realised how experienced he was in undercover operations, and she was relieved she hadn't argued with him on the point.

She inhaled the cold fresh air as she headed to the street exit, one hand gripping the handle of her case. As she took her first step onto the Paris pavement, she sent up a prayer of thanks. She found herself calling for God's help frequently during this crazy war. She imagined there were many people praying for mercy during these brutal

times.

The thought reminded her of Pierre's words, and she could see why he might question God's plan amid this horror sweeping through the world.

Lizzie had her instructions and set out at a brisk walk. Jack had pored over a map of the city with her for hours. She hadn't been to Paris since she was a child, and then, she had paid no attention to street names and neighbourhoods. She was a carefree girl on holiday with her family, and the memory of those joyful summer days created a pang of nostalgia that rippled through her.

Jack had pointed out the quarters and neighbourhoods and insisted she study the layout of the city religiously. There was a lot she still didn't know, but she could visualise some of the map and she was well prepared to meet Hannah.

The air was bone chilling, but the sky was pale blue, and Paris was pretty even in the harsh January temperature. As she walked, she came to a sudden stop and tilted her head upwards as she caught a glimpse of the frost covered Eiffel Tower glinting between buildings. She remembered seeing it when she was a child, but now it was symbolic of the old Paris and her eyes misted over. The famous landmark was imposing, and she marvelled at how it dominated, as though it was right next to her in the centre of the city. She had paid little attention to it back then, but now it made her even more determined to do all she could to free France of Nazi tyranny.

The day would come when people would once again be free to visit Paris on a whim without carrying papers to prove they weren't enemies of the Reich. Jack talked often of them travelling to France together after the war, and the thought boosted her spirits.

The streets were thronged with German military. There was an army barracks in the city, and Paris was the ultimate reward for soldiers on leave and the dream

assignment for high-ranking officers, so it was no surprise.

Lizzie was careful to keep her eyes down and avoided engaging with anyone. She passed a row of tall French government buildings, blood-red Nazi swastika-emblazoned flags flapped in the wind, and German soldiers guarded the entrances.

It was only when she turned a corner and saw the road sign she was looking for, she realised how scared she was, and relief poured through her veins as she slowed her pace.

Things moved quickly after that. She heard a whistle and looked towards the sound. A dark-haired woman sat on a bench, newspaper in one hand. Hannah must have sent one of the other agents to meet her and, for a second, she was disappointed.

Lizzie made her way towards the bench and saw two shabby bicycles propped against the wall nearby.

‘Welcome to Paris, sister,’ the dark-haired woman said, her startling blue eyes flickering over the top of the newspaper to meet hers.

Lizzie gasped. ‘It is you!’

Hannah winked at Lizzie. ‘I wondered if you’d recognise me.’

‘You fooled me, for sure.’

‘You almost fooled me with your blonde hair, but I recognised your walk.’

‘My walk?’ Lizzie asked, taken aback.

‘Yes, you have a distinctive walk. Proud and upright.’

Lizzie was in awe of the legendary agent who had defied all odds to stay alive throughout countless daring Resistance operations.

Lizzie scanned the area to make sure no one was within earshot. ‘What do you think of my new blonde look?’

‘Love it,’ Hannah said.

‘We dyed my hair, so I’d look more like you, but now you’re brunette, we’ve swapped places!’ Lizzie whispered.

Hannah’s full lips curved into a mischievous smile. ‘Maybe, maybe not. Come on, let’s get out of here,’ she said, moving towards the bicycles.

The evening was drawing in fast, and the bitter wind blew in their faces as they whizzed along the bank of the River Seine. Lizzie shivered, but she wasn’t sure whether it was from the cold or from the excitement of being back with Hannah.

CHAPTER 11

Lizzie's bicycle pedals rattled along as a heavy dusk descended over Paris. They left the riverbank, and their worn tyres bounced along a shortcut Hannah used to reach the safe house.

'Are we going to the same place where I saw you last time?' Lizzie asked, as they rode in tandem.

'No, I had to move again. It's not safe to stay anywhere for too long, especially when we transmit messages.'

They cycled for around thirty minutes and Lizzie's case bumped on the back of Hannah's bicycle. She'd insisted on carrying it for her.

Lizzie followed Hannah around a sharp bend, and they rode further down the narrowing track. It was dark now, and the only light was from the moon, partially hidden behind a row of tall trees on the horizon. A sprinkling of stars twinkled in the sky like glitter on canvas, and as Lizzie raced after the Resistance leader, she had never felt more alive. Danger was all around them, but the feeling of aliveness was invigorating.

'Here we are,' Hannah said, dismounting and steering first her bicycle and then Lizzie's into a damp smelling shed. 'Come on in and let's get warm. I've been saving some hot chocolate for you.'

'Hot chocolate? My goodness, I don't think I've had anything as extravagant as that

since before the war.'

Hannah grabbed a torch, and the faint light of the beam reflected off the ground, and Lizzie saw her beautiful smile. 'Me neither. One of our team bought it for me on the black market as a gift. I kept it for when you arrived to celebrate.'

Lizzie was more moved than she could express with words, so she reached over and touched Hannah's shoulder. 'That's so kind of you. I'm pleased I came! Not just for the hot chocolate, but it is a delightful reward.'

They giggled like the young, carefree women they might still be if they hadn't been swept into an all-consuming war. Then they shrugged off their coats and removed their hats and hung them on the hooks in the entrance hall.

Hannah removed grips from her hair as she looked in the mirror and lay them one by one on the surface of the armoire. Then she twirled around, and her natural blonde hair swished onto her shoulders.

Lizzie stared 'A wig! It looked so real, I thought you'd dyed your hair too.'

'No, I have several wigs I use for quick disguises. Now we'll both be blonde and are more likely to pass as sisters. Let's get this hot chocolate going and then I'll show you around and you can settle in. We will use this house as our base and hopefully won't have to move for a while. We're deep enough into the countryside and far enough from the city for our messages not to be easily intercepted, and thankfully we're out from under the watchful eye of the Boche.'

Hannah paused and turned to look at Lizzie. 'You will need to be ready to move at any minute when I'm not here. You just never know when they might be onto us. '

The thrill of danger reverberated through Lizzie, and memories of her last mission

tumbled into her mind. She had been terrified a lot of the time, but now she was back again for more. It was a strange phenomenon, and she had missed the addictive rush of outfoxing the Nazis. She understood why agents found it difficult to return to an ordinary life after they worked undercover.

Pretending to her family she worked at a research bureau had been difficult. Acting as though she wasn't madly in love with Jack was even harder.

Lizzie thought her mother suspected her of being up to something, and as Hannah lit the stove and boiled water for their chocolate, she thought of Rose back home in the house at Regent's Park.

'You look like a cat that's got the cream,' her mother said a few days before Lizzie left, when she had returned from an afternoon of code-breaking, interspersed with feverish lovemaking at Jack's flat. 'Whatever they're giving you in that office, I'd like some of it, please! You're glowing. Work really suits you.'

Lizzie laughed and didn't trust herself to comment. Her mother was perceptive, and she wished she could be truthful with her. They'd always been close, and the subterfuge was taking a toll on Lizzie, but what could she do?

The Official Secrets Act was not to be taken lightly, so she couldn't divulge the SOE business to her mother. Her life wasn't her own anymore. As far as her relationship with Jack went, it was challenging enough to keep their feelings for each other a secret at work, without risking sharing the truth with her family.

No, she had to keep it all bottled up inside and sometimes she thought she might explode. The only person she could talk to openly was Jack. Her mind flicked back to an image of his firm hands touching her skin, making her cry out. She hadn't known such pleasure existed until she met him, and it still amazed her. There was a lot to be said for falling for an older, experienced lover, instead of enduring the fumbings of

someone her own age.

The lascivious thought made her smile. It was her little secret and she would draw on the delicious memory of it to get her through the difficult times now they were apart.

‘Lizzie, here is your chocolate,’ Hannah repeated, interrupting Lizzie’s daydream, and placing a bowl-like cup with two handles in front of her.

Lizzie inhaled the chocolate smell. ‘This smells divine.’

‘I don’t know how good it will be, but even a hint of chocolate will be amazing,’ Hannah said. ‘Let’s hope it tastes as good as it smells.’

They both drank the steaming beverage.

‘It’s superb!’ Lizzie said.

‘Not bad,’ agreed Hannah. ‘Who knew that one day a tiny sprinkling of chocolate in hot water would be such a treat?’

‘It makes a change from seedy tasting coffee, that’s for sure.’

The sweet chocolate warmed Lizzie and a wave of tiredness washed over her. She yawned uncontrollably.

‘You poor thing. You must be worn out.’

‘It’s hitting me now. Thank you for this,’ Lizzie said, pointing to the cup.

The blackout blinds were in place. Hannah lit candles when they entered the house, and a glass lamp cast a delicate glow around the room, giving it a hint of the ghostly.

‘What is this place? Whose home, was it?’ Lizzie asked, gazing around the large kitchen.

‘It’s an abandoned farmhouse. I don’t know the family who lived here, but there was a mezuzah at the entrance. I took it down right away. May as well stick a Star of David on the door and announce Jews live here! ’

Lizzie looked confused. ‘What’s a mezuzah?’

‘It’s a small case with a scroll inside. Mezuzah is a Hebrew word that means doorpost. It’s an old tradition and you’ll see them on Jewish homes everywhere. Or at least you used to. It’s too dangerous now.’

‘That’s so sad,’ Lizzie said. ‘What kind of scroll?’

‘Basically, it contains biblical verses of the Shema Israel . It’s a Hebrew prayer Jews have been saying for thousands of years since the time of the ancient Jerusalem Temple services.’

‘That sounds like a beautiful tradition.’

Hannah nodded. ‘Yes, but it isn’t keeping Jews safe now. Look at this house.’

The silence hung between them as sadness enveloped them both.

After a pause, Lizzie said, ‘I know it’s difficult to believe now, but Jack says there will come a day when all of this will be behind us.’

‘Dear Jack. I hope he’s right. How is he, by the way?’

Lizzie blushed slightly and hoped Hannah didn’t notice in the dim light.

‘He is well. Busy as ever. He sends his love.’

‘And Henry?’ Hannah asked, her words tentative, as though they would catch in her throat.

Lizzie reached for her hand. ‘Jack said he is in good spirits. We wanted to bring you a letter from him, but decided it was too dangerous. Just as well I didn’t because my case was searched on the train, and I already had papers stuffed in my underwear.’

Hannah’s eyes widened.

‘What happened?’

‘Two German soldiers had it in for me. Luckily, there was a friendly officer in my compartment who took pity on me and warned them to leave me alone. ’

‘That was lucky. Beware of friendly Nazis, though.’

‘I was careful. I learnt that the hard way last year.’

‘Did the soldiers suspect you or was it routine?’

‘Routine, I think, but they found the novel I brought to use as my codebook!’

‘No—’ Hannah’s eyes widened further. ‘What did you say?’

Lizzie laughed at the ridiculousness of it all. ‘I said it is my sister’s favourite novel, and they appeared to believe me.’

‘Thank the lord,’ Hannah said, letting out a low whistle.

‘Yes, indeed. I was terrified when they got my case, which reminds me, I’d better give you the stuff I brought for you.’

Lizzie opened her case and searched beneath the layers of clothing until her fingers touched a small seam in the lining. She pulled at the thread, and it unravelled effortlessly. Hannah looked over her shoulder. ‘That’s clever.’

‘They are so clever. It’s amazing what the tailors do with the clothes and accessories. All I need to do is sew the seam back up with black thread and the hidey-hole will be invisible.’

Lizzie passed Hannah the certificate they had made for her. ‘This is one document you asked for.’

Hannah unfolded it. ‘Ah, what a treat,’ she said dryly. ‘A certificate to deny my Jewish identity.’

‘I’m sorry we need that.’

Hannah smiled sadly. ‘Even now, sometimes I can’t quite believe how rotten it’s become in France. Back in the thirties in Berlin, I remember when the Hitler Youth became fashionable, and our parents warned me and my friends to stay out of their way for fear of being bullied. It was frightening, but I would never have guessed it would come to this. We’re not allowed to be Jewish. The world has gone mad.’

‘Yes, it has. A few years ago, I never would have believed the Channel Islands would be under Nazi occupation or that London would be bombed every day.’

‘Those bastards are still blitzing you, then?’

Lizzie nodded. ‘Yes, only last week we had to run to the shelter in the middle of the

night. So many houses have been destroyed in London. Not just London...'

Hannah offered her hand to help Lizzie to her feet. 'Come, let me show you to your room. At least we can put this sad beautiful house to good use, and you'll be comfortable. Let's take your case up.'

'I've got loads of money to give you too,' Lizzie said.

'Loads of money is always good! Resistance is not a cheap business, and Jack does all he can to get supplies to us,' Hannah said as she grabbed a lamp and walked up the wooden staircase. 'Give me the money upstairs and I'll stash it away and show you where we keep it, in case you need it when I'm out.'

'I wanted to bring a new wireless too, so we'd have a backup, but thank goodness I didn't, or I'd be in the hands of the Gestapo by now.'

'Don't worry. The wireless we have is good. I'll show you it later in the attic.'

Lizzie told Hannah she'd been to Bletchley Park for training, and Jack had also helped her get better at operating the wireless and sending and decoding messages.

'Bletchley Park must be an exciting place,' Hannah said.

Lizzie agreed. 'It's full of brainboxes. I felt rather dim when I was there, though. Didn't understand half of what they said.'

Hannah laughed out loud. 'If all the dim ones like you are working with the Resistance, we're sure to win the war!'

Lizzie unfurled the notes from inside her brassiere and from the thick lining of her dress and passed them to Hannah. She still had some hidden in her case for

emergencies.

‘Do we need to send a message to London to let them know you’ve arrived safely?’ Hannah said.

‘Yes, please. Jack asked me to let him know when I arrive. 6 p.m. is the time we agreed I’d aim for.’

They walked up another two floors and entered a dark attic.

‘It’s almost six now, so let’s get set up.’

‘I’m looking forward to seeing this place in the daylight. It’s spooky like this,’ Lizzie said.

Hannah said, ‘It doesn’t help we can’t have the windows bare, but better safe than sorry. They are strict about the curfew and blackout, so that’s rule number one. When you’re working with members of the network who I’ll introduce you to over the coming days, always make sure they aren’t being sloppy about these things.’

‘Will you stay here at night, or will you need to be stationed in the city for the new job?’ Lizzie asked, not relishing the thought of long nights in the spooky farmhouse alone.

‘If I can get back, I will. I won’t know until things are underway and I learn more about what the job entails.’

Hannah pulled out the wireless set from a hidden cupboard in the wall and showed Lizzie the different keys. It was like the ones she had practiced on.

‘We can use your novel for the coding next time. For now, let’s use the existing

codes. Jack will recognise those too.'

At six on the dot, the call signal came in.

Hannah fired off a message in Morse code so quickly, Lizzie wondered how she did it. It took her ages to plan out her messages before sending them.

'How on earth did you know what to send off the top of your head like that? '

'It's easy when you send brief messages. It was only three words. They just need to know you're safe. There's no other news. I'll show you how I send a longer message as soon as we need to.'

If Lizzie was in awe of Hannah before, now she was even more impressed.

Hannah flashed Lizzie a cheeky smile. 'Come on, Seagrove, let's organise something to eat before you fall asleep on your feet. We'd better get you tucked up in bed for a good night's sleep because we have lots to do tomorrow.'

They put the wireless set away and headed back down to the kitchen.

Lizzie's head was spinning. She couldn't stop thinking about how proficient Hannah was with the wireless.

'What were the three words?' she asked when Hannah reappeared from the pantry.

'Have a guess,' she said.

'Umm. How about "We are safe"?'

'Try again,' Hannah said, shaking her head.

‘Hello from Paris?’

‘No, I’m starving, so I’d better tell you!’

‘Go on then,’ Lizzie laughed.

‘Seagrove has landed.’

‘Ah, that makes perfect sense. Short and to the point.’

After a simple meal of hard black bread and cheese, Hannah accompanied Lizzie to her bedroom. Once she was settled in her room, Hannah said goodnight.

‘Goodnight, sister,’ Lizzie called after her, and Hannah blew her a kiss.

CHAPTER 12

The following night, Lizzie, Hannah, and two other members of the Liberty Network lay in wait in a ditch by a railway track on the outskirts of Paris. It was freezing, and they were all restless.

The countryside was still and quiet, apart from the occasional rustle of nocturnal wildlife. Tension weighed in the air and with every passing minute Lizzie grew more anxious.

Francois offered her a cigarette, and she accepted to distract herself. He cupped the flame with his hand and lit the cigarette for her with a gallant flourish.

She tried not to cough but couldn't stop herself as the acrid smoke caught in the back of her throat.

'Amateur smoker?' he said.

She grimaced. 'Afraid so. I thought I should learn how to smoke, but I don't enjoy it.'

They passed the time with Francois giving her demonstrations on how to smoke. The train was due about thirty minutes earlier and they were wondering whether it was going to arrive. It wasn't uncommon for trains to be cancelled at the last minute, and they had no way of knowing.

'No sign of it in thirty minutes and we'll call it a night,' Hannah said.

Lizzie was glad of the gloves she had borrowed from Hannah. The evening air had a fierce chill that made her face sting and Francois predicted more snow.

A shiver ran through Lizzie, and she thought longingly of her comfortable bed in London. What would they all be doing at home now? It was late. They would probably be fast asleep. Unless there was an air raid.

No one could escape the menacing shadows of war.

That morning over coffee, Hannah had explained that their new Resistance network had been extraordinarily successful in disrupting military trains that transported German weapons and troops.

‘Do people die when you blow up the tracks?’ Lizzie asked, still blurry eyed from a heavy sleep as she warmed her hands on the cup.

‘Not always, but yes, sometimes soldiers do. We try not to kill civilians in any operation, but it’s difficult these days to tell a collaborator from a civilian.’

‘I know it’s necessary, and I’ve been trained for it, but I’m still not used to killing people—even German soldiers,’ Lizzie said.

‘That’s understandable. Even now, I kill only in self-defence or as an unavoidable part of an operation. We don’t want to give the Nazis an excuse for reprisal killings of civilians.

The thing to remember is for each soldier we kill; it is one fewer that can point their gun at one of ours. Make no mistake, the Wehrmacht’s orders are to clean up France, one way or another, until there’s no one standing who opposes Hitler. ’

Lizzie stubbed her cigarette out until the flicker of orange withered on the ground.

She had resolved to harden her heart for what must be done, or she wouldn't have agreed to return, but her previous experience still haunted her.

War was a brutal business and there was no way to avoid deaths if you were to carry out successful operations.

'You are so experienced, I wonder how on earth I'm going to learn all this in time to replace you,' Lizzie said, turning to Hannah, a wistful note in her voice.

Hannah adjusted her beret over her blonde hair. 'Don't worry. I don't plan to disappear completely. I will be back as much as possible to train you in what we do. That's why we need you to stay for a while. Just because I'll be working on another mission doesn't mean we should release the pressure on the rest of our operations. We're making too much progress.'

'How long do you think the new mission will take to resolve?' Lizzie asked.

Hannah said, 'It depends. It has the potential to be long term, and if I infiltrate at that level to gain intelligence, I'll stay as long as they let me.'

'If there's anything you need from me, just let me know,' Lizzie said.

'Sshh,' said Philippe, who had been quiet throughout. 'I think I hear the train in the distance.'

The small group fell silent and strained their ears.

After a few seconds, Hannah commanded, 'Go!'

They scrambled up the bank towards the railway line. Lizzie watched Hannah position the explosives on the track, illuminated by the silver light of the moon. They

used small torches so they could see what they were doing. One wrong move could prove fatal.

‘Get out now!’ Hannah said, her voice low and urgent.

This was the most dangerous part of the sabotage, and it could easily fail. So many factors were out of their hands, such as the exact time the train would roll over the explosive-rigged track. If they got it wrong, they could blow themselves up, and the train crew would be alerted in time to make an emergency stop.

They watched from the safety of a thicket on the hilly bank of the railway.

‘Here it comes,’ whispered Francois.

Lizzie held her breath, and her heart felt like a gong banging in her chest.

The noise of the train pierced the quiet night, and she glimpsed it rattling along the track in their direction.

‘One minute left,’ said Hannah, who had been counting down in her head. ‘If it doesn’t explode soon, we won’t hit the target.’

Lizzie stared, mesmerised. It wasn’t long since she had been watching *Gone with the Wind* in Leicester Square. Now she was blowing up railway lines. It was surreal. She exhaled and her breath steamed in the cold air.

‘Come on,’ Hannah snapped, staring at the track, willing it to explode.

The train rushed towards them.

Lizzie spotted sparks of dancing lights on the railway lines and then heard a loud

hissing sound. It was like watching a Hollywood film as she saw the track explode in front of her eyes just as the train hurtled towards it, seeming to pick up speed as it grew nearer.

The brakes of the train screeched to a halt, but it was too late to stop, and it barrelled into the epicentre of the explosion.

‘Time to get out of here,’ Hannah instructed, her voice strangely calm.

As they ran through the trees, holding their torches low to light the way, they heard loud booming sounds .

‘We must have hit the weapons cargo,’ Hannah said.

‘It’s such a shame to waste them,’ Francois said as he ran, keeping pace beside Lizzie.

‘Stealing them would be too dangerous though, wouldn’t it?’ Lizzie said.

‘Yes, it would be good, though. Use their own weapons against them, the Boche bastards.’

‘Well done, boys,’ Hannah said to Francois and Phillipe, slapping them both on one shoulder. ‘Now get out of here and lie low for a few days. And if anyone sees you, stick to your cover stories.’

They rushed to find their bicycles in the various spots they had hidden them and scattered in different directions. Only Lizzie and Hannah stayed together and followed Hannah’s route through the dark forest towards the farmhouse.

The girls cycled as fast as they could over the hard, frosty ground and weaved around

trees until the forest gradually thinned.

In the distance, they heard voices and screeching wheels.

‘This way,’ Hannah whispered.

They pedalled along a narrow path that bordered a field eerily lit by the moon until Hannah made a sharp turn and jumped off her bicycle. Lizzie followed. Hannah threaded her way through a dark lane, then stopped abruptly and pushed on a wooden gate. Lizzie joined her on the other side and looked around, surprised.

‘Voila,’ said Hannah, winking.

‘My goodness, how did we get here so suddenly?’

They stood in the large back garden of the farmhouse.

‘My magic trick,’ Hannah said. ‘I’ve been working on finding shortcuts from various directions. There are several ways to access the grounds, so it’s easy, really.’

‘Easy!’ Lizzie laughed. ‘I’m not sure I’d call it that, but all the same, it’s brilliant. You’re brilliant.’

‘Come on, enough for one night. I’m shattered. Let’s make a cup of tea.’

It wasn’t long before they sat drinking tea by candlelight in the kitchen. ‘I’ll show you how the furnace works tomorrow. Fuel is scarce, so we have to eek it out.’

‘The walls are remarkably bare for such a lovely house,’ Lizzie remarked, gazing around in the dim light.

‘Yes, there’s not much in the way of antiques or artwork. My guess is the Germans stripped the place of anything valuable like they did in Jewish homes in Germany and Poland. Paris is one enormous art collection for the Nazis to loot. They are plundering everything they can and transporting it all to the German treasure chest to fund more of their vile plans.’

Lizzie frowned. ‘I heard something about that on the radio at home a while ago. It all seems so distant when you’re in London, but to see it in action like this is shocking.’

Hannah said, ‘They stole our apartment when they arrested and sent my parents away during the Kristallnacht pogrom and I was left homeless.’

‘It’s hard to believe this is allowed to happen in a civilised world,’ Lizzie said, her heart hurting for Hannah as she talked about the disappearance and possible death of her close family.

Hannah said, ‘There is nothing civilised about this world. People pretend there is, but when evil gets a grip, there are always those greedy enough to relish in the spoils of other people’s efforts.’

‘Do you still have friends in Germany?’ Lizzie asked, her tone gentle.

Hannah sighed, and the sadness tore at Lizzie’s emotions as she watched the pain on her face. ‘No, I doubt it. I’ve been living like a rat in the sewers for years. No one in Germany can know my real identity, or I wouldn’t be able to operate there.’

Lizzie listened to her every word, transfixed by the awfulness of it all.

‘Following Kristallnacht, I stayed with friends for a while, and I spied on our apartment from a distance and watched as a German family moved in. Then, over the coming months, Jewish families were given minutes to pack a small bag and vacate

their homes. Their bank accounts were stripped bare, and we never saw them again.'

'You are so brave. I don't know how you do it,' Lizzie said. Tears rolled from her eyes and splashed onto her cheeks as she listened to the horrifying story unfold.

'You are brave too, dear Lizzie.' Hannah squeezed her shoulder. 'One way or another, we will get through this. I'm so glad you're here. It gets lonely sometimes.'

'I'm glad I'm here too, and I'm so sorry, you've had to go through this hell, Hannah. It's pure evil. If there is anything I can do when I'm back in London to help you look for your family and friends, please tell me.'

Hannah's eyes shone with unshed tears. 'The whispers I hear on the underground networks make me scared to even hope to see them again. I fear the ultimate Nazi plan for the Jews is even more diabolical than we have been led to believe.'

'This war must be over soon. Surely it can't go on much longer,' Lizzie said. 'What do you make of France falling so quickly? I didn't even realise we were in real danger in Jersey until my father was called urgently to the War Office in London.'

Hannah replied, 'Once the Phoney War was over, France folded like a house of cards. De Gaulle calls for resistance, albeit from his comfortable base in London, but the French fight was over before it had barely begun. That coward Pétain sold France down the river in an afternoon, to waving swastika flags on the Arc de Triomphe, military parades and the sound of marching bands on the Champs-élysées.'

Lizzie saw the anger etched into her delicate features that belied the Resistance operative's mental and physical toughness.

They chatted for a while longer. Hannah asked after Lizzie's sisters and Lizzie made her laugh with tales of what they got up to in wartime London.

It had been an intense night, and as Lizzie lay her head on the pillow, she blocked out the image of the exploding train and tried not to think about how many people were killed.

CHAPTER 13

Hannah rose early and went for a run through the fields surrounding the house to clear her head. She had meant it when she told Lizzie she was pleased to have her staying for a while. Being the leader of a Resistance network made for a lonely life, and although she had become a loner over the years by necessity, she liked Lizzie and enjoyed her company.

The British SOE agent was new to the undercover world, but it was obvious from their first meeting that she would be a real asset to the Resistance. She too was recruited by Jack, which had given Hannah confidence in Lizzie from the start.

As Hannah's feet relentlessly hit the ground, her thoughts switched to Henry, her fiancé, as they so often did. It had been so long since she'd seen him, sometimes she had trouble visualising his face.

They had fallen hopelessly in love, but their worlds had been smashed to pieces by the declaration of war and they were ripped from each other.

Henry enlisted immediately and flew with the RAF. She was proud of him, but it didn't make missing him any easier. A normal life was just not meant to be for her. Gradually she had adjusted to the realisation, but sometimes she fantasised that one day they would be reunited, marry and have children like they had planned.

Even the thought of having children made her sad because it reminded her of her family, and how close they had been before insanity gripped Germany and spread like an infectious disease.

Hannah increased her speed, pushing herself for one last sprint. A thin film of perspiration coated her forehead as her muscular frame raced across the field.

When she slowed her pace, she turned down the footpath to the back of the house to the gate she had taken Lizzie through the previous night after they blew up the rail track.

Hannah tried not to think about the devastation the network caused in its quest to crush the Nazi regime. It was better that way. This wasn't the life she dreamt of as a young girl, but it was the life that had been forced upon her.

Pushing the back door open, she called out to Lizzie to see if she was awake yet. There was no sound of movement in the house, so she went upstairs.

After Hannah washed, she knocked on Lizzie's door and poked her head into the room when her guest called for her to enter.

'You're a sleepyhead,' Hannah said.

Lizzie pulled herself up in bed and stretched wearily. 'I think it all caught up with me. I just couldn't seem to wake up.'

'You must have needed a good rest. Come down when you're ready and I'll make us some breakfast.'

Lizzie's stomach rumbled on cue, and they both laughed.

Over breakfast, Hannah gave Lizzie details about things in the house and what she needed to know to keep everything running smoothly.

'You've got a ration book?' Hannah asked after they finished the toast she had

prepared for them.

‘Yes, I’d better show you all my papers. London asked me to report if any of the documents are no longer compliant with the latest regulations.’

Lizzie fetched a pile of papers, and they went through them. ‘Here’s my ration book. Does this look right?’

Hannah narrowed her eyes and studied it carefully. ‘It looks fine. I need to go and get changed now. I’ll grab my book, and we can compare them. I got a new one recently.’

Hannah entered the kitchen a while later and declared Lizzie’s papers adequate to pass inspection, and Lizzie noted a few details to pass on to the SOE forgery department.

‘It sounds as though they are ramping up for a huge operation in London. I remember when Jack was a lone wolf long before they set up the SOE.’

‘What was he like?’ Lizzie asked, unable to resist. She had been jealous of Jack and Hannah’s close bond when she first met Jack, but now she was secure in his love for her, and she genuinely liked Hannah. Maybe one day, they might even be sisters-in-law. She didn’t mention that now because no one could know about her and Jack. Not even Hannah.

The warning, Careless Talk Costs Lives, rang through her head. The less everyone knew, the safer for all concerned. You never knew what bit of gossip that seemed harmless enough could inform the enemy of what the Allies were planning.

Hannah stood to clear the plates from the table. ‘What was Jack like? Hmm, let me think. It all seems so long ago now. We were both so young. ’

‘Did you know him by the codename Raven?’ Lizzie probed.

Hannah screwed up her forehead as though trying to conjure the information. ‘I think that came later. In the early days, I knew him as Jack, but we both used various cover names for gathering intelligence.’

‘You have been doing this for such a long time. I’m in awe of what you’ve accomplished,’ Lizzie said.

‘In awe? Oh no, don’t be in awe. I have only ever done what I had to do in the circumstances. It’s never felt like I had any other choice. Other than to roll over and let the Nazis slaughter us. That has already happened to too many defenceless people. I’m not going down without a fight.’

‘You underestimate yourself,’ Lizzie said. ‘What you’ve achieved is more than most would dream of doing, even in these harsh conditions.’

Hannah smiled graciously. ‘I can see you’ve made your mind up, so I’ll take it as a compliment. Thank you.’

‘Tell me about the new operation,’ Lizzie said, itching to know what Hannah had up her sleeve.

‘There’s still some planning to do before I can go in.’ She paused and tilted her head. ‘Oh, I forgot, a message came for you from London this morning.’

Lizzie did her best to suppress her blush, but she felt herself flushing and hoped Hannah would put it down to excitement.

‘What did they say?’ She was thinking of Jack and hoping the message was from him.

‘It was from Raven. He asked you to send him a message at your agreed time this evening so you can test your codes.’

Lizzie fizzed with joy. Jack was eager to hear from her and she would be able to message him on Hannah’s radio using her own codebook tonight. It wasn’t much, but that would be the only connection they had whilst she was in France.

Lizzie tried to act nonchalant. ‘He gave me my schedule for when I need to send a message. Thank you, I’ll do it later. It will be good practice for me to test our system for when you’re not around.’

Hannah said they should go into the city to claim their rations, and they could discuss the upcoming operation on their way. ‘I want to scope out the building where I’ll be working undercover, so it will be great to have you with me.’

They went to get ready to leave, and Hannah reappeared shortly after wearing her brunette wig, and holding a similar one for Lizzie.

Lizzie looked confused. ‘Hold on, I thought the idea was we stick to our cover of me being your sister visiting you.’

‘We will most of the time, but for scoping out the German High Command, it’s better they don’t notice their new employee loitering around outside. I change my hair and the way I dress frequently so people don’t remember me.’

This was a whole other side to tradecraft that Lizzie had barely touched on in her training. Lizzie thought nostalgically of the time in Jack’s flat where she had dressed up for him in various disguises and wigs so they could decide what colour to dye her hair. It was Jack who said blonde would be good because she would pass for Hannah’s sister. He hadn’t mentioned the Resistance operative was a master of disguise.

Hannah showed her how to grip her hair close to her head and then styled the wig for her.

Lizzie looked in the mirror at the new woman staring back. 'It's incredible how different I look. Much older, for one thing.'

'It's the style. The less we draw attention to ourselves, the better. Unless our goal is to distract the Boche on a mission, you must learn not to attract them. '

Lizzie was fascinated. Hannah would be her mentor in developing her skills.

'Here, wear these too. We'll be the spectacled, frumpy sisters today.'

Lizzie put the thick frames on her eyes and dissolved into laughter when she saw her reflection. 'I look so old. And not a glamorous old, either!'

'Good, that's what we want. No one looking at us, no one remembering us, and no one stopping to talk to us. You look perfect. Let's go.'

Hannah gave Lizzie a suitably dull brown coat and matching hat to wear. Lizzie assessed herself in the full-length hall mirror and saw she blended into the muted décor effortlessly.

Lizzie moved to take the bicycle she had ridden the night before, but Hannah reached to stop her.

'No, we use different bicycles and baskets for shopping. Never use the same one for a sabotage mission as you do for your ordinary outings.'

Lizzie followed Hannah, who produced a brown bicycle from under an old sheet. It was equally battered, but this one had a straw basket on the front.

‘The devil is in the detail,’ Hannah said.

‘And of course, it’s brown!’ Lizzie laughed.

Five minutes later, they were on their way. The residue of crisp night frost lingered on the country lane, and the sun gleamed in the pale blue sky.

‘It’s hard to believe on a beautiful morning like this that the world has gone to hell, isn’t it?’ Hannah said as they rode side by side, the glacial air rushing into their faces.

It was true. The countryside wasn’t painted in vibrant shades and draped in colourful blooms like in summer, but it had its own austere winter charm. The trees were naked; the branches stripped bare, and the bark sparkled like delicate spun silk.

They spoke in French and Lizzie practised her Parisian accent. Lizzie remarked she couldn’t detect any German accent in Hannah’s French.

‘That’s just as well, or I’d likely be dead by now. My cover would have been blown. Those lunatics would demand to know what a pious German girl, loyal to the Führer, was doing in Paris in wartime. They expect them to be busy breeding baby Hitlers for the Aryan race. It’s fine for German men to be here, of course, but women should be at home in the Fatherland with their hair in plaits, living a life of the three Ks.’

The contempt in Hannah’s voice was clear.

‘Wait, what are the three Ks?’

‘Kinder, Küche and Kirche!’

‘Hold on, don’t tell me. Give me a second.’ Lizzie stared at Hannah as she pedalled, then scrunched her brow as she sought to translate the words. ‘Children, Kitchen and

Church... Is that right?’

‘Exactly. Your accent is good, you know. Do you speak German fluently?’

‘I know enough to get by, but it would need work for me to pass as a native speaker. My mother says I have an ear for languages. I can speak Jersey French too.’

‘German may very well come in useful. Not sure about the Jersey French,’ Hannah said with a wry smile.

‘Jèrriais is the traditional language of the Jersey people. My grandparents think it will die out if they don’t start teaching it to children.’

‘That would be a shame, although I imagine it’s the least of their problems now. If I know anything about the Nazis, they will have already enforced learning German in Jersey schools! They are nothing if not efficient. ’

Lizzie hadn’t thought about that, and the sudden vision of the Nazis storming into her childhood parish school made her shudder.

Hannah said, ‘A French woman who is fluent in German is useful for our operations in France. They are unlikely to rouse suspicion if they have a sensible reason for speaking the language.’

‘I’ll bear that in mind. Do you miss the old Germany?’ Lizzie asked.

Hannah pedalled faster, and Lizzie did the same to keep up.

‘Berlin was my home, but there’s no place for me there anymore. You don’t miss a country that persecutes and murders your people.’

‘I’m sorry,’ Lizzie said. ‘It was thoughtless of me to bring it up.’

Hannah said, ‘Not at all. It’s good to get it off my chest because I rarely get the chance. You can ask me anything.’

They cycled on in silence for a while.

‘Welcome to Paris,’ Hannah said, pointing to the Eiffel Tower in the distance.

‘I was amazed yesterday when I saw it. It seems visible from wherever you are. I had forgotten how large it is.’

Soon they reached the city, and Hannah told Lizzie to follow her. ‘Pay special attention when I tell you where to look. We’re going to check out the Nazi HQ where I’ll be working.’

The bustle of the city struck Lizzie again. The cafés were packed even at this hour and men in German uniforms spilled onto the boulevards, smoking and talking. A sea of green-grey bodies swarmed through the city.

Lizzie spotted a group of Gestapo wearing long leather trench coats, jumping into a black car and racing away. The sight of them froze her blood, transporting her back to Reims in an instant. Thank God they didn’t need to pass them.

‘They are all over Paris picking fights with anyone they can. Be prepared for an encounter at any time,’ Hannah said just loud enough for Lizzie to catch her words.

Lizzie saw a beautifully dressed, elegant woman on the arm of a Nazi officer. She stopped herself from staring, but the sight infuriated her. It was obvious she was French by the way she walked and wore her clothing. Besides, like Hannah said, there weren’t many German women in Paris. Their husbands preferred to keep them

hidden away at home whilst they enjoyed the fruits of a lavish lifestyle, far from the fighting and the disapproving gaze of their wives.

High-ranking Nazis spent a sizeable portion of their days feasting with their cronies on the best French fayre and knocking back expensive champagne as if the French population wasn't teetering on the edge of starvation.

'Look casually at the building to the right now. The huge one like a luxury hotel,' Hannah said.

Lizzie snapped herself out of her people watching and turned her head to the pale stone building just to one side of them.

'Let's pull over slowly here,' Hannah instructed.

An army truck almost knocked Lizzie off her seat, and she cursed under her breath. Until she met Val, she'd never sworn. Now she used curse words often, but only to herself or occasionally with Jack.

They dismounted and stood next to their bicycles. Hannah extracted a note from her pocket, and they pretended to be studying the shopping list of basic supplies.

'That's German High Command HQ. I've found a way in as the personal secretary to the major general.'

'How do you get the job?' Lizzie asked.

'A sympathetic contact in the French administration put my name forward. I was interviewed and accepted on the spot.'

Lizzie knew how terrifying it was to trick a Nazi officer, but this was on an audacious

scale. Hannah was not planning a temporary posting where she went in for a few days and then disappeared. To stay alive, the Jewish Resistance leader would need to masquerade as a permanent employee who was committed to the Reich.

CHAPTER 14

Hans stretched his long legs before rising from his desk and striding across to the window to survey the tree-lined Avenue Kléber below. He thought the Avenue was a fitting location for their headquarters, but winter didn't do Paris justice, and he looked forward to spring when he would dine on the boulevards again.

The German High Command had installed themselves in the Hotel Majestic. Hans had been appointed to the prestigious position of second in command within the organisation and upon his arrival, he was overjoyed to discover the building wasn't majestic in name only. He had his own private rooms and relished the power that came with the job.

He congratulated himself yet again for landing such an influential Paris posting. Granted, his father had pulled some strings, but he felt worthy of the position. He had earned it after his years of dedication to the Reich.

Yes, he deserved this, and so much more.

Hans grew more ambitious and hungrier for recognition as the months passed. He was determined to be awarded a promotion to general as a young man. He was silently contemptuous of his superiors, whom he saw as tired, overfed and unfit for the distinguished rank of general. Hans was certain he could do a much better job if he was only given the opportunity. Why should he be penalised because of his age?

As a prominent figure in the Hitler Youth, he saw the fruits of the Third Reich as his birthright. He was born at the perfect time to rise to greatness as Germany reclaimed

hers. At age fifteen, Hans was one of the first to join the organisation in 1926 and set an exemplary record. He recruited others and saw to it they became as passionate as him by indoctrinating them into Hitler's ideology. He became a leader within the organisation and was respected and idolised by many of the boys, which further fluffed his ego.

When it was time for him to choose a career, his now retired-military father was keen for Hans to follow in his footsteps and enlist in Germany's small army. There, Hans thrived and rose through the ranks swiftly. His father was a devoted member of the Nazi Party and ambitious for Hans to make a mark. Every time he saw him, he harassed him about his next promotion.

Staring out the window, no longer seeing the grand avenue below, Hans pictured the day when he would telephone his father and inform him, he was now the general in charge of German High Command. Number one. Oh, how he ached for that moment. His father said he was proud of him occasionally, but Hans knew he measured him constantly against his brother, who also attained a prestigious position in Paris and had a habit of shining rather too brightly for Hans' liking. It was obvious his brother was his father's favourite, which drove Hans to prove he was better.

Hans didn't trust his father.

He didn't trust his brother.

Hans didn't trust anyone .

A sharp rap at the door interrupted his reflection.

'Come in,' he barked, turning away from the window and sitting back down at his desk with an undisguised sigh.

The secretary he had inherited from another officer entered the room.

‘Sorry to bother you, Herr Major General, but some important papers have arrived for you to review and sign.’

Hans nodded. There was something about her that irritated him, but he couldn’t say exactly what it was. Perhaps it was her overt French-ness.

He shook his head. No, it couldn’t be that, because he had taken to the replacement secretary, and she was French.

The new blonde girl tried to hide her virtues, but she was a stunning beauty. His pulse raced at the memory of her that cascaded into his thoughts. He had been having erotic fantasies about her ever since she came for the interview, and she hadn’t even started work yet.

Hans accepted the papers and nodded towards his over-eager secretary when she asked permission to leave for the day.

He enjoyed being alone in his magnificent office and preferred not to be disturbed. The reason his secretary irritated him floated into his mind. It should have disturbed him, but it didn’t. Instead, it made perfect sense.

She reminded him too much of his wife in Berlin. Hadn’t he jumped at the posting to France so he could put distance between them?

And for the past months, he’d had to put up with a woman hovering over him in the same solicitous way his wife did. Her constantly watching him and trying to attend to his every need irked him and caused him to avoid her.

He sighed again as she closed the door gently behind her.

Just as well she had to leave because of ill health. She had asked if the job would still be available when she recovered, but he had fobbed her off.

He couldn't stomach her timid deference anymore. Hans liked a woman with more fighting spirit, although he acknowledged his wife was the perfect mother to his two children. It was simply better when he wasn't with her.

As evening fell, he longed for a cigarette, but it was a filthy habit the Führer disdained, so Hans had given up smoking cold turkey. He should never have fallen into such ill-discipline, and he blamed his brother. He had encouraged Hans to smoke with him in the cellar of their big house when they were boys.

Weakness in himself and others repulsed him, and he wished he could shake the craving, but it was difficult. Sometimes, he could taste the tobacco on his tongue and had taken to chewing gum in desperation to quell the yearning.

The more he fantasised about the new secretary, the more his loins burned. He would pursue some action at the Lido club later that night to calm himself. Even if the secretary proved willing to accommodate his needs, he reasoned it would take some time to seduce her.

His superiors had called a meeting and, regretfully, he tidied the papers on his desk and straightened his tunic in the mirror. Hans prided himself on his good looks and immaculate personal grooming. A sloppy appearance reflected a weak mind.

One day in the not-too-distant future, he would be the one calling the meetings, and they would all dance to his tune. The glory would be his, and he would be acknowledged in the history books as the great general who had secured the Führer's vision of a thousand-year Reich.

A chilling thought flitted into his mind.

God help anyone who dared stand in his way.

CHAPTER 15

Hannah prepared to leave for her first day at German High Command. She buzzed about getting ready and making sure she had the right papers, whilst Lizzie tidied their breakfast things away and washed the dishes.

They had unconsciously swapped roles.

‘Are you all set?’ Lizzie asked.

‘Yes, I think so. Collette Simon at your service.’ Hannah performed a curtsy with a flourish.

‘Very nice. We have more names than hot dinners,’ Lizzie said with a nervous laugh.

‘That’s not hard!’ Hannah joined in the nervous laughter.

The levity diffused the tension that had hung over them at breakfast. They were both aware their lives were on the line if Hannah’s undercover role went awry. If one of them was interrogated by the dreaded Gestapo, how long would they be able to hold out without spilling the identities of the others in the network?

No one knew how soon they would crumble unless they were caught. It was a terrifying reality of the job that was never far from an agent’s mind in occupied territory.

‘Good luck today. I will be thinking of you,’ Lizzie said, grazing both Hannah’s

cheeks with a kiss. 'I'll be waiting to hear all about it this evening.'

'And good luck to you. I will be thinking of you as well. Please make my apologies to Francois and tell him I will see him soon.'

Lizzie followed Hannah to the back door and waited as she climbed onto her bicycle of choice.

'You look perfect for the job. Just like I would imagine Collette Simon when she's reporting for duty.'

Hannah looked elegantly professional and had somehow toned down her natural breathtaking beauty. Her blonde hair was styled and pinned up neatly beneath her hat, and she wore thick framed black glasses that drew attention away from her startling blue eyes.

'I didn't think you needed glasses. Do the lenses blur your eyesight?'

'No, I don't wear glasses normally, but they're such an ingenious way to change your look. An optician replaced the lenses with plain glass for me. Let's hope no one wants to borrow them!'

Lizzie waved Hannah off and returned to the kitchen. It was easy to make light of things when they were together, but when silence fell over the remote farmhouse, sadness tore into Lizzie, squeezing at her emotions.

This had been a real family's home. Until the Germans occupied France, they would have been living an ordinary life. Lizzie wondered how many children had lived there and what ages they were.

Had the family fled from France to safety and that was why the house lay empty, or

were they in hiding wondering if they would ever see the light of day and taste freedom again?

The world had been turned upside down for millions. It felt like they were pawns on a chessboard, and anyone could be captured on a whim at any moment. This forlorn, forsaken house reminded her of her childhood home in Jersey. Memories of joyful evenings sitting in her favourite window seat at Seagrove watching the sun set over Portelet Bay filled her mind. Her idyllic childhood, running down to the beach and swimming in the sea every morning and enjoying leisurely picnics with her family, made her want to weep for all that was lost.

And she was one of the lucky ones. Her parents were relatively safe in London with her two sisters. Archie was away, goodness knows where with the Royal Engineers, but at least he was fighting for their freedom. Although her grandparents were a constant source of worry. They had stayed in Jersey instead of leaving on the boat with them in time. Surely, if they had known the island would be occupied and they would be forced to live under the Nazi jackboot, they would have listened to their pleas to leave.

Were her dear Nan and Pops pottering about their wing of the house and were they in good health? When her thoughts turned dark, she had to steer them away from any other possibility.

Hannah had shown her how to keep the furnace burning, but the old building was slow to heat with a limited supply of coal. The previous day when they returned from the city, Hannah chopped wood she had gathered in the forest into smaller logs for the fire, but there was no point lighting it now. Lizzie must go out to meet Francois soon, so it would be a waste of precious resources.

The plan was Hannah would come home after work, but they didn't know what time she could leave German High Command.

Lizzie's chest tightened and panic took hold.

Val had shown Lizzie how to breathe to calm herself, and soon she felt more in control and her heartbeat slowed. Jack had taught her how to talk to herself when she felt she was spiralling into overwhelm. His wise words entered her mind now. 'When we panic, we can't think clearly, and that leads to mistakes.'

She was grateful to them both because coping with the mental strain of living in ever present danger was just as vital as the physical aspects of staying alive when undercover. The leader of the Liberty Network would teach her different things. Hannah had set up the Reims Resistance that Pierre now led, and then stepped up to form the fledgeling Paris Resistance. There was so much more to her than running a network.

Jack had warned Lizzie to be careful. 'Hannah works with us, and, to some degree, she follows our plans, but remember, she is not officially affiliated to British Military Intelligence or the SOE. That girl is quite brilliant, but she is a wild card.'

'In what way?' Lizzie probed, always fascinated to hear more about Hannah's methods.

'Well, you'll see when you work with her. She reports to me because we fund the network and our goals are mostly aligned, but she answers to no one. I am not her commanding officer, and she makes her own decisions. Occasionally, I have asked her not to carry out certain operations, but she has gone ahead and done so anyway. All I'm saying is, please be wary of her bold schemes. They could get you both killed.'

'What is on her agenda that differs from ours?' Lizzie asked .

'Think what she has been through. Her family was arrested in Berlin. She doesn't

know if her parents are still alive. According to the latest intelligence, every Jew who didn't get out of Germany in time is rotting in a labour camp or institution somewhere or has even been put to death.'

They had talked at great length about Hannah's psychological state. 'Imagine what it must be like to be in her head, knowing everyone and everything you loved has been destroyed by the Nazis. Taking them down so they can't persecute or murder any more Jews is what motivates her. And frankly, it's useful to us, which is where our goals align.'

'That sounds very cold when you put it like that. Are we only using her, then?'

'In a way, we are. You need to harden your heart in the intelligence game. Caring too much for your agents and partners isn't wise. Mind you, I've found it to be easier said than done.'

'Poor Hannah. At least she knows Henry is alive,' Lizzie said.

A shadow crossed Jack's face. His brother was never far from his thoughts. 'True. I try to keep the vision in my mind that Henry and Hannah will make it through the war and will be married and live a long and happy life.'

'That's a lovely vision,' Lizzie said, the emotions rising in her throat. 'I hope she finds her family after the war, too. Surely, most Jews will live through this and be liberated when it ends. They can't murder them all.'

Lizzie shook her head and brought herself back to the present. She must get on with the job at hand and not think too much about why she was alone in a farmhouse in occupied France, pretending to be visiting her sister who was now secretary to a high-ranking officer at the Reich HQ .

She longed to send a message to Jack, but she had no news that warranted the risk, so she restrained herself from running up to the attic.

Jack had set up a private system to receive her messages directly to Baker Street. 'It's bad enough waiting to hear from the other agents via Bletchley Park's cumbersome teleprinter. I'm not doing it for your messages. It's far too slow. I need to be on standby to fly in immediately if something goes wrong.'

The fact he was prepared to create a new system just to receive her messages quicker warmed her heart, and she agreed it was a good plan if he wouldn't raise any eyebrows.

'Let eyebrows raise,' he said. 'The powers that be keep talking about the need to set up a better system now we're expanding with more agents. I will tell them this is the beginning and I'm testing it in the field.'

Jack reminded Lizzie of Hannah. He was just as much a wild card as the Resistance leader. The only difference was he had mastered the art of operating so that when he hit the boundaries and wished to break the rules, he convinced his superiors he should create new ones.

The kettle steamed as she poured the water for tea. She would message Jack as soon as there was news worth sharing. What she yearned to tell him was how much she was missing him. It had only been a few days and already it felt like there was a hollow space carved into her chest. In bed last night, with the covers up to her chin to keep out the gnawing cold, she had longed to reach out and touch his warm body like when she stayed at his flat. She had grown used to talking to him every day, and it was a wrench without him.

There was a loud knock at the back door, and Lizzie froze. Should she answer or pretend to be out?

The blood rushed to her head as she turned to check her reflection in the mirror. She cast her eyes over the outfit she had hastily thrown on to come down for breakfast and see Hannah off. Her face was devoid of any makeup, and she wore her freshly dyed blonde hair loose.

She would do.

Lizzie walked slowly to the door, her pulse racing. Scenarios flooded her mind with every step. Was Hannah's new job a trap, and they had come to search her home? Hannah had given this address as a double bluff. Using a false one would make it more suspicious, she reasoned. If she was open about living there with her sister, there was nothing to hide, and she could come home every evening.

It had seemed a clever idea when they discussed it as they cycled back from staking out German High Command in the city.

But now scary possibilities raced through Lizzie's head. Was it the Gestapo at the door? She'd heard how they rapped loudly on people's doors, bundled them into cars, and they were never seen again.

Lizzie inhaled deeply, squared her shoulders, and opened the door.

A short older woman stood on the doorstep; an elegant scarf looped stylishly around her neck. Her eyes twinkled as she peered up at Lizzie and greeted her, 'Good morning.'

'Good morning,' Lizzie replied, her heart thumping. 'How may I help you?'

CHAPTER 16

Hannah checked her watch and saw she was early. She slowly approached the main door of the building that not too long ago had been the Hotel Majestic.

The imposing stone facade was bedecked with red and black swastika banners fluttering eerily in the icy wind. No longer a welcoming hotel for visitors to enjoy all that Paris had to offer, but it served instead as a sobering tribute to the Reich's domination of Europe.

Paris, once the celebrated city of light, had become the city that hosted murderers who brought bloodshed in their wake.

Anger raced through Hannah's veins, and she breathed slowly to maintain her composure. For as long as she could pull it off, she would pretend to be a humble servant of the Reich. She would act as though she was in awe of the Nazi rise to power and for that reason, she was honoured to have been selected to work at one of their most prestigious offices in France.

A guard on the door greeted her and, after checking her papers, stood aside for her to enter the gleaming marble lobby. She thanked him and her eyes strayed to the ominous eagle above the breast pocket of his grey-green tunic glinting in the pale winter sun.

After years of living a double life, Hannah was practiced at not showing her emotions, but her heart pounded, and her throat was dry as she walked through the lobby and followed the soldier's directions.

This was it. She had wanted to go undercover in a Nazi office in Paris for months. The day had finally come when she had made it a reality. Several times she had suggested such a mission to the SOE via Jack or Lizzie and been refused. Until recently, when she had decided she would do it with or without their support. The intelligence she had received about the intensified persecution of the Jews in France that the Nazis were planning from this exquisite building was more than she could ignore.

Lizzie told Hannah that her boss had intercepted her last message before it reached Jack, and she had commanded them to organise backup immediately.

Hannah had planned that message carefully, after she secured the position as secretary to the second in command. She presented her request as a way for London to receive hand-picked intelligence on the Wehrmacht's operations straight from German High Command. On top of that irresistible bait, Hannah made it clear she was going ahead anyway and therefore would be engaged elsewhere. The Liberty Network would lose the momentum they had gained in sabotaging German railways and transport systems around Paris. There were no other members of the network who were equipped and available to lead the network without her.

Fortunately, the SOE recognised the incredible opportunity, and Hannah was relieved when they agreed to send backup. She had called London's bluff and had no intention of stopping the network's operations, but it would be far easier this way.

Now Hannah could focus on her daytime role, and Lizzie would keep things running with her guidance. The network's activities and nighttime strikes would continue with or without Hannah's presence.

At the top of the shiny marble stairs, Hannah turned a sharp right, pausing only for a second to gain her bearings and scan the area. Then she resumed her brisk pace and arrived at a polished wood door with her new boss's name inscribed on a gold plate.

Hannah knocked and when a woman's voice called for her to enter, she opened the door to reveal the major general's secretary, typing at a large, neat desk.

The woman looked up expectantly and then rose from her desk. Hannah saw the recognition dawn on her pale pinched face from when Hannah attended the recent interview.

'Good morning. Welcome to German High Command,' she said. 'Herr Major General isn't in the office yet, but you should see him this afternoon.'

The secretary seemed nervous. She showed Hannah around the office and explained that she would clear her desk by the end of the day.

'Thank you so much. This is such an opportunity. You must be sorry to leave such a wonderful position.'

They spoke in French, and the secretary said she was indeed extremely sorry. She was devoted to the regime but had to leave because of ill health.

The hateful words choked Hannah, but she gave no outward appearance of disdain, and the secretary seemed assured she would replace her adequately in serving her Nazi boss. The secretary talked of him as though he were the Messiah, and Hannah wondered how she could be devoted to such a man.

The morning passed quickly as the secretary explained the role in detail and showed her how to perform the various tasks that would be required.

'Herr Major General likes his coffee dark and sweet. He gets irritated if it's not made properly, so let me show you exactly how to make it for him.'

The deference the French woman showed the Nazi brute made Hannah feel queasy,

but she played her role impeccably as she watched the pandering secretary prepare the coffee.

Then she insisted on watching Hannah do the same.

‘It won’t do to upset him. His temper can be quite harsh,’ she said.

For a second, Hannah fantasised about throwing the hot black coffee in his arrogant face, and then wringing his neck.

She chided herself. It wouldn’t do to get carried away, no matter how much she despised her new boss.

‘Would you like a cup of coffee, Collette? Collette is such a beautiful name, by the way,’ the secretary said, flushing slightly as she complimented Hannah.

‘Thank you. Yes, I would love a cup.’

They stood by the large window, holding their coffee. The frost-covered Eiffel Tower twinkled in the sun and loomed in the Paris sky like an avenging giant.

‘The coffee is wonderful,’ Hannah said. ‘I don’t think I’ve tasted coffee this good since early in the war, before supplies ran out.’

‘Yes, we are fortunate Herr Major General commands only the best for our office. The entire building is entitled to the best coffee and food supplies. That’s one benefit of working here,’ she said, as if the Nazis hadn’t stolen her country .

Hannah’s hands itched to shake the collaborating secretary, who had clearly sold her own people out.

‘Herr Major General is so generous’ she gushed, oblivious to Hannah’s contempt. ‘You may eat lunch here and I recommend you do. It’s delicious and there’s plenty of choice.’

Hannah’s stomach rumbled at the mention of plentiful food, despite her disgust at the woman’s eagerness to accommodate the Germans.

‘That sounds excellent,’ Hannah said. ‘It’s difficult to get a good meal in Paris these days.’

‘You won’t have to worry about that now. I admit I will miss it tremendously. Back to ersatz coffee and dry bread for me,’ she said.

‘Do you intend to return to work when you recover?’ Hannah asked.

The woman looked suddenly miffed. ‘I want to, but unfortunately, Herr Major General says it is out of his hands.’

‘That is a shame. Thank you for so generously showing me what to do, so I don’t mess it up.’

‘I take great pride in my work. It’s not every French woman who gets posted to a job as prestigious as this. You should be proud of being selected for this role.’

Hannah agreed they were both very lucky and she would do her best to fill her shoes and not let the major general down.

‘You do important work here. I understood from the interview that this office is instrumental in leading the way on the statutes against the Jews.’ Hannah said Jews with disdain to encourage the secretary to share what she knew.

The woman preened at Hannah's effusive praise.

'Yes, that's correct. It is such important work, and we have only just begun. Herr Major General evaluates the proposed ordinances and decides what to pass on to his superior—the general.' Her voice grew louder with enthusiasm. 'They say that soon they will rid us completely of low life Jewish scum.' She leaned closer to Hannah and her voice dropped to a whisper. 'You probably won't see much of the general himself, but there will be correspondence and reports for you to translate and type.'

Hannah looked nonchalant, as if the words didn't pierce her heart like a sharp blade. 'Do you mean there'll be reports to type up about the pending laws regarding Jews?'

The secretary nodded, and her eyes were solemn. 'That's right, we oversee all of that, and it's a mammoth task. There are big plans to speed things up.'

Hannah finished her coffee and rested the cup on the table, sick to the stomach at the dark future the secretary painted with such glee. 'I will look forward to learning more about that. I have heard the whispers about how they mean to rid France completely of the vermin Jews, just like they did so successfully in Germany.'

'Well, you've got the right job. Herr Major General is extremely passionate in that area. He advises the general closely, you know. He is such a committed man.'

Another bolt of fierce anger ripped through Hannah, and she held her hands stiffly at her sides to retrain herself from attacking the odious woman. Her urge was to grab the cruel collaborator by the scruff of her neck and stick her face in the steaming hot water in the sink until she couldn't breathe.

There was a cough behind them, and they both turned.

'We don't employ you to stand around idle,' the major general snapped as he strode

across the room. The door to his private office slammed behind him and he disappeared.

Hannah arranged her face into an expression of regret. 'I hope he won't fire me,' she whispered.

The secretary flushed. 'No, no, don't worry. That's how he is most of the time. You'll get used to him. He's charming beneath his brusque exterior.'

CHAPTER 17

The woman on the farmhouse doorstep looked around and then back at Lizzie before she spoke softly. 'The frost lays thick on the ground today.'

Her statement startled Lizzie, but then she stood aside and invited the visitor to enter. 'Come into the kitchen,' Lizzie said. 'It's slightly warmer.'

The woman's face was pink from the fierce wind that whipped around the house, and Lizzie offered her a cup of tea.

'I can't stay long. I only came because I have an important message to deliver.'

Lizzie fixed her gaze on the woman. 'Go ahead, although Angel isn't here, I'm afraid.'

'Yes, she warned me she wouldn't be around, and I promised only to come if it was critical.'

'Are you alright? What is it you need?' Lizzie asked, stepping into her new role as stand-in for Hannah, or Angel, as she was codenamed in the Liberty Network.

The woman's voice was now so low that Lizzie had to lean closer and strain to hear .

'There is a Jewish family that needs moving. I reached out to a sympathetic contact who helped us in the past, but they have no room for them now. There was a Nazi search last night, and they took someone in.'

‘I see,’ Lizzie said, feeling like she was already in over her head on the first morning without Hannah. ‘Angel didn’t mention it. What would you like me to do?’

‘Angel probably hasn’t heard yet, but she will know where to hide them. Can you reach her somehow?’

Lizzie shook her head. ‘There’s no way to reach her now. Perhaps later this evening, but I can’t be sure.’

The woman chewed her lip.

‘Who shall I say called when I see Angel? I promise I will pass on your message as soon as possible.’ Lizzie touched the woman’s arm and guided her towards a seat. ‘Come sit. Let me make you some tea.’

The woman perched stiffly on the chair. ‘No, thank you. I must leave. You don’t understand the severity of the situation. The family needs moving today.’

Lizzie replaced the kettle. ‘Alright, tell me what you think Angel would do if she were here.’

The woman’s craggy face brightened, making her look younger briefly. ‘Thank you,’ she said, sinking back against the chair. ‘Angel would find somewhere for the family to stay until we can get them out of Paris. They are in grave danger.’

Lizzie took a deep breath. ‘Where is the family hiding now and how many of them are there?’

‘They are in my bedroom. There are four of them. An eminent scientist who the Nazis would love to get their grubby hands on, and his wife and their two young children—a boy and a girl.’

‘If we don’t move them today, they will be arrested. My flat is small, and I have neighbours who will inform on me if they suspect I’m harbouring Jews. ’

Lizzie pondered for a moment. ‘How about hiding them in the Jewish Quarter? Surely someone would take them in.’

‘Do you have the list?’

Lizzie racked her brains and after a pause said, ‘What list?’

‘Angel has a list of contacts who volunteered to help us. We can’t put this family in the Pletzl.’

Lizzie looked at her blankly.

‘That’s the name of the Jewish Quarter.’

‘Why can’t they hide there?’

The woman sighed. ‘Because it’s the first place, they’ll search for them, my dear.’

‘Oh, right,’ Lizzie said, feeling as dense as she had during her time at Bletchley Park. ‘That makes sense. I hadn’t thought of that. Sorry I’m new to this.’

‘It’s a terrible business. There are more Jews under threat of arrest every day.’

‘What do you suggest until I see Hannah?’

The woman looked around the room. ‘This is a big house. I could bring them here.’

Lizzie knew it was a bad idea, but she couldn’t think what else to do. ‘Why do the

Nazis want this scientist so badly?’

‘I don’t know the specifics, but they want his research. He says he’d rather die than give his life’s work to them. Sadly, he just might if we can’t get him and his family out.’

Lizzie made up her mind. ‘Alright. Can you get them here tonight after dark?’

‘What about curfew?’

‘If the Nazis are hunting for them, under cover of darkness will be your best chance of getting them here without being stopped. Come through the forest.’

The woman nodded. ‘Yes, that’s the way I came this morning.’

They discussed the plan and then Lizzie saw the woman out and hurried to get her coat. Now she was late for her meeting with Francois about the next rail attack.

The day passed in a blur of activity. Francois was still waiting even though she was half an hour late when she arrived breathless to the Jardin des Tuileries.

‘I’m so sorry I’m late,’ she said, as she dismounted her bicycle and fell into step with Francois. He was an attractive man with a noticeable limp. She guessed he was in his late twenties. Lizzie had spotted him from a distance when she approached their rendezvous point.

They walked side by side and he reached for her hand. ‘It’s best to pretend we are sweethearts. Less suspicious.’

Lizzie’s hand was stiff in his, but she played along.

‘Relax, I won’t eat you,’ he said, his voice soothing.

‘Sorry, I’m not used to holding strangers’ hands.’

‘We won’t be strangers for long with Angel busy elsewhere.’

‘True. Talking of which, what train will we catch to Vichy?’

Francois was quick-witted and knew she was asking what train they planned to sabotage next. Briefly, he told her it was all under control. He and Philippe would handle it with the help of a few members of the network.

‘Do you want me there?’

Francois said, ‘It’s better we only call on you when we are low in numbers. Angel is usually in charge of the logistics.’

Francois released her hand and lit a cigarette that he passed to her, an amused smile on his lips as she took a puff and handed it back to him.

He smoked and reeled off what the network needed in the next drop from London, as though he were reading from a shopping list .

‘How’s your memory?’ He asked.

‘Quite good.’

‘Let’s see. Repeat the list back to me,’ he said, the challenge in his warm eyes.

Lizzie repeated the list word for word.

‘Excellent. You’ll do,’ he said.

‘Just as well, because there’s no one else waiting in the wings.’

Lizzie found him charming, if a little cocky.

‘I will let you know when to expect the supplies,’ she said.

They agreed on a day and time for their next meeting and walked to the gate of the park where Francois took her by surprise and kissed her passionately on the lips.

‘I suppose that was necessary for our cover too,’ she said, raising an eyebrow.

‘You’re getting the idea, Jacqueline. Perhaps when all this is over, I can ask you on a proper date.’

‘That’s gallant of you, Francois, but I have a boyfriend.’

‘Too bad,’ he said.

They parted and Lizzie thought about the intriguing Resistance member whom she was certain was not really called Francois.

But then she wasn’t really called Jacqueline and was only just getting used to her new cover name.

Life was never dull as an agent. She had already met two unusual characters today, and there was still a busy night ahead of her when all going to plan, the family would arrive at the farmhouse.

It was an enormous risk she was taking when the Germans were searching for the

Jewish scientist, especially with Hannah undercover at German High Command. Had she miscalculated, and in trying to save one family, endangered the whole network?

She passed long lines of people queueing outside shops, looking weary and hopeless. Lizzie pedalled faster, turning sharply to avoid a group of soldiers in the distance. Once out of the city, she breathed freely again, and the fear gradually dissipated.

Lizzie had made her first solo rendezvous with the network member Francois. No one had stopped her, and she had arrived back at the farmhouse safely. A glimmer of excitement flickered in her.

Now she would send her first message to Jack using their own codes.

CHAPTER 18

Hannah didn't see the major general that afternoon, but the hours passed quickly as the secretary showed her how to fulfil the demands of the job. Her eyes kept straying to the clock on the wall as she thought of Lizzie and Francois, wishing she were with them.

At 5.55 p.m. after they had cleared the day's work, the secretary removed what was left of her personal possessions from the desk drawers and stood up.

'Well, that's it for me. I shall leave now. Good luck, Collette.'

'Thank you for all your help and good luck to you too.'

Hannah watched the secretary knock tentatively on the major general's door and she heard him bark a command to enter. The door opened and closed, and Hannah wondered what was being said, but could only hear a low hum.

The secretary emerged within a couple of minutes, an expression of disappointment etched onto her face.

Hannah was about to pack up to leave when the secretary said, 'Herr Major General would like to see you in his office now. '

Hannah hurried to the door, which stood ajar, and stepped inside.

'What are you working on?' he asked, skipping the niceties.

‘Herr Major General, your secretary has just finished showing me my tasks and I was about to leave.’

He snapped, ‘There’s an urgent letter I need you to translate now.’

Hannah nodded, attempting a smile, even as her stomach churned. She wanted to hurry back to the farmhouse to check on Lizzie. ‘Of course, I will stay as long as you need me.’

‘Good,’ he replied, his tone stiff and reeking of self-importance. ‘I imagine you’ll be out of here in good time to get home before the curfew, and if not, my driver will take you.’

Hannah’s heart pumped at the mention of home. Being driven in a Nazi vehicle was not what she had planned.

Her new boss pulled a chair nearer to him and beckoned for her to sit down.

Hannah had no choice but to comply, and she shuddered inwardly when he leaned nearer to show her the letter.

‘This is the covering letter from the French police department tasked with assisting the Special Staff for Pictorial Art to retrieve and confiscate Jewish owned art. It will be helpful for you to read it carefully, so you understand the project, as it’s an important part of our work.’

Fierce emotions rolled over Hannah as she held the paper and scanned the French text, acting as though it was just an ordinary letter for her to translate.

The major general pointed to the report. ‘This is a detailed list of all the artworks found so far and exactly where they are located. I must update the general first thing,

so please have a German copy ready for me before you leave tonight.'

Hannah seethed more with every word that came out of his repulsive mouth, but the entire operation depended on her being able to show indifference, no matter what loathsome things he said or did.

'Any questions?' he asked, his legs now so close they touched hers.

'It all seems quite clear. I'll get started right away,' she said, springing up from the chair.

'Very good,' the major general said, looking her up and down.

Hannah saw he was devouring her with his eyes and struggled to hold on to her pleasant expression.

He called after her just as she was about to slip out of the room, her heart thudding at the prospect of what she must do next. 'Collette?'

She turned back, 'Yes, Herr Major General?'

'Leave the door open in case you have questions.'

Hannah did as he asked before taking a seat at her new desk. She began translating the document, anger coursing through her, making it difficult to concentrate. She had known before taking the job that they were implementing terrible things, but witnessing how they were stealing Jewish-owned art in such a methodical industrial manner knocked the breath out of her.

She forced herself to translate the text as quickly as she could. If she took too long, she'd miss the window to leave before the curfew. If she was driven home, she'd be

leading them right to the door of a British agent who might even be in the middle of transmitting a message to London. Hannah couldn't risk it, so she translated at lightning speed and then typed up the German copy. Her blood felt as if it was sizzling in her veins when she translated how the Special Staff for Pictorial Art, thereafter, referred to as the Staff, had seized art treasures in Paris and looted the art collections from the Rothschild family palaces.

There was a long list of Jewish names and art collections, and by the time she was finished, Hannah felt sick. The more she discovered about the systematic persecution the Nazis perpetuated, she realised it was just as she feared.

They meant to do in France exactly what Hannah watched them do in the pre-war Germany of her youth, which was to strip the Jewish population of all civil rights until they were forbidden to work, study, own a home or business, or marry a Gentile. They were completely segregated from the rest of the population. The Nuremberg Laws of 1935 introduced yet more heinous antisemitic legislation and resulted in German Jews being imprisoned or transported to labour camps, unless, like Hannah, they escaped whilst they still could.

The letter concluded with a chilling summary that the Staff was successfully safeguarding the Rothschild's art collections and all previously Jewish-owned art and valuables for the Reich.

Safeguarding!

That was one word for it. More accurate words would be stealing, plundering, seizing, and looting. Hannah longed to exchange the word safeguarding for one of those, but her true feelings would be obvious, and her cover blown in one futile act of resistance.

No, she must be patient and play the long game, even if it meant letting her Nazi boss

leech over her without kicking him in the crotch. Resistance required patience as well as carefully planned and orchestrated acts of sabotage.

Hannah looked up to see if the major general could see her from his seat, but the door had closed slightly. She took a chance and scribbled as many names onto her handkerchief as she could. It was a risky way to smuggle information out the building, but even with her excellent memory, she wouldn't be able to remember the names without some way to record them.

She would ask Jack if they could get her one of those clever mini cameras. She'd seen an actor using one in a new spy film. It had fitted into the palm of his hand. Maybe it wasn't real, but if it was, she needed one. It would be the perfect way to siphon intelligence out of German High Command.

Lizzie prepared to contact Jack. At her first scheduled attempt, he had not responded.

'Come on, Raven,' she said aloud, nerves clawing at her, making her jump at every slight sound from beyond the small window. It was dark, and she still found the attic just as spooky as on her first tour of the house. Lizzie was desperate to get her first Paris to London transmission done. The first time she did something new in the field, was always the most nerve-racking.

Lizzie tapped out her call signal in Morse and waited for a response. Jack had explained to her she wouldn't always be able to get through and she might need to try several times, but she should always wait for his response before sending a message.

Seconds passed, and it seemed like she was once again out of luck. This was the last opportunity of the day. Lizzie hadn't realised she was holding her breath until a response came back.

This is Raven. Go ahead, Seagrove.

They had agreed not to share anything personal if he didn't start the message with his codename. Jack said he would do his best to be there for every potential time, but in case he couldn't, another radio operator might respond to the message, so they had to be cautious.

Knowing he was there, even though she couldn't hear his voice, connected to her through this incredible technology, made her feel giddy with joy. Her heart skipped and raced. She longed to tell him how much she missed him, but there was no time for such indulgences now.

There was important information to get across in her message, and she must transmit it as quickly as possible to limit the chances of being detected by the Germans on the airwaves.

Country before self, Val's voice echoed in her mind.

The Count of Monte Cristo sat on the small table where she had positioned the wireless set.

The book lay open on the page of their selected passage. Lizzie carefully tapped out her message using the double transposition cipher.

She listed the supplies Francois requested, and she told Jack they were trying to hide an important scientist the Nazis were searching for.

Lizzie had planned the message before she started transmitting, or it would have taken her too long to figure it all out. She kept it as brief as possible and didn't mention the scientist and his family were due at the farmhouse this evening. It would only worry Jack and there was nothing he could do even if she told him.

In the training, they had briefed her to only share exactly what the SOE needed to

know. That way, if the enemy intercepted the message, not only would they have a hard time cracking the agent's unique cipher, but even if they did, without context, they would struggle to grasp the meaning.

She completed the message and signed off with their agreed send code. If she didn't sign off, it was a signal something was wrong .

Lizzie pictured Jack sitting in his office at Baker Street, his glossy black hair falling onto his forehead and him brushing it aside impatiently.

One final quick burst of dots and dashes came through. Lizzie scribbled them down with her pencil.

ATW we will holiday in France.

Lizzie's heart fluttered at the thought of him tapping in the message, and she knew he missed her just as much as she missed him. In some ways, it was harder when you were left behind, wondering if the other was safe, risking their life undercover in occupied territory.

The thought of holidaying with Jack in France after the war would pull her through the dark days ahead.

CHAPTER 19

Hannah had still not returned, and Lizzie couldn't sit still for more than a few minutes at a time. She tried to concentrate on an article in a French newspaper, but the German propaganda turned her stomach, so she pushed it away. It was only good for the fire.

Lizzie crossed and uncrossed her legs, tapped her feet on the hard floor and drank a cup of possibly the weakest tea she had ever tasted.

She sat in the kitchen waiting for Hannah and the mysterious contact from the network to turn up. Now the night had turned inky black, and she couldn't see anything outside, and grew more nervous with every passing second.

There was a sharp rap at the door, followed by two more in quick succession. Lizzie bounced up from her seat, fear and relief racing through her in equal measures.

If the Gestapo were onto her, the mission was over before they'd even begun. Lizzie opened the door, her stomach lurching.

There stood the woman, her eyes bright beneath the rim of her hat .

Thank God.

Lizzie looked at her expectantly, and the woman whose name she still didn't know because it was safer for them both, used a Liberty Network code to check it was safe for them to be there.

Lizzie replied, 'It is so good to see you, madame. Come in.'

The woman turned and waved towards the dark shadows at the edge of the garden.

The shadows rustled and in the faint light from the kitchen, Lizzie saw a man appear from the bushes. He turned and stretched out his hands. A little girl joined him, clinging onto his hand, followed immediately by a slightly taller boy. They can't have been more than four or five, and they were both painfully thin, like their father.

As they approached the door, Lizzie smiled warmly at the children, trying not to show the distress she felt. It was obvious they were terrified.

There was more movement, and a woman slipped from the bushes and joined her husband and children. She touched both children's heads to reassure them. It was the natural response of a mother when her children were frightened. Lizzie took in the tragic scene.

What kind of world was this, where tiny children had to be smuggled to safety at night to hide from the authorities of the country in which they were born?

The sight of the children's pitiful faces and fearful eyes made Lizzie more determined to do all she could to help the family. This reality was even worse than she'd thought when she was back home in London listening to the radio. All the broadcasts about the evil regime had not prepared her for the pain of this moment.

Lizzie silently beckoned to them to enter the house, and they did so one by one. When they were all inside, she invited them to sit on the sofa and she heated the pan of onion soup and served it to them with a small piece of bread from the remainder of their measly rations in the pantry.

How they were going to feed an additional four mouths she didn't know. What would

Hannah say about her taking in the family without discussing it with her? It had all happened so fast and had seemed the right thing to do. Now they were sitting here, their lives in her hands, she second guessed herself.

Had she made a terrible mistake? Perhaps they would have found someone else to take them in if she hadn't so readily agreed.

The parents looked at Lizzie expectantly, and she felt she must say something. It wasn't their fault she didn't know what she was doing and was new to the job.

'I want you to know we will do all we can to keep you safe.'

The mother replied first, and Lizzie saw tears welling in her eyes as she spoke. 'Thank you so much. You cannot know how grateful we are to you. And we owe our lives to you, dear Margot,' she added. Her exhausted voice faltered as she gazed at the woman who stood watching over the family like a mother hen.

'Please don't cry, Maman,' said the little girl, her big brown eyes filling with tears.

The woman scooped her daughter onto her lap. 'No, no, you are right. This is no time for crying. Let's eat our soup and be grateful we're all together.'

She blew on a spoonful of the hot watery broth and eased it into the girl's mouth. The tears in her eyes dried as she swallowed, momentarily comforted by her mother's soothing words.

The little boy sat at the table and ate his soup hungrily, but his parents seemed unable to eat, even though they were obviously malnourished.

Lizzie thought how upsetting it must all be for them and how frightened they must be for their children's safety and for each other. No wonder they had no appetite.

‘Please eat a little whilst it’s still warm,’ she coaxed them both, looking from one to the other. ‘You will need your strength so eat whilst you can.’

They followed her advice and soon they were all eating the soup and chewing the stale bread.

Lizzie signalled for Margot to come through to the next room.

‘They will be safe here for tonight in the basement. I’ll talk to Angel when she arrives home. They can’t stay hidden. It’s no way for anyone to live, especially not these sweet children.’

Margot squeezed Lizzie’s arm. ‘You’re thinking like someone in a normal situation. I must stress this is not a normal situation. If the Gestapo find this family, they will take the father to work in one of their institutions to develop their diabolical experiments. That’s why they are on the run. Then the Gestapo will send the mother and children to a camp in Germany or Poland. That’s if they don’t shoot them for disobeying orders. If we don’t keep them hidden, it’s the end for this family. The odds are they won’t see each other again.’

Lizzie stared at Margot, swallowing hard as she tried to digest what she was saying. After a pause whilst she let it sink in, she said, ‘What else do I need to know about them?’

‘The only thing you need to know is they won’t be safe here for long. You must get them out of France as soon as possible. It’s over for them, if you don’t. They are on too many lists and the hunt for Jews and all dissidents in Paris is intensifying. ’

Lizzie’s head was reeling at the onslaught of information.

‘How do you suggest I get them out of France?’

‘Angel will know what to do. Ask for her help. I must go now,’ Margot said, looking at her watch. ‘There are patrols in my neighbourhood and nosy neighbours who will inform on me for the price of a loaf of bread.’

‘How will you get into the city during curfew?’

‘Don’t worry. I know how to dodge the patrols, but I can’t leave it too late. It’s easier when it’s just me. My only regret is I couldn’t let these dear people stay with me. The neighbours would have heard them in my tiny apartment.’

Lizzie nodded sympathetically. ‘At least here we don’t have any neighbours for miles. You did the right thing, Margot. I will do my best to get them out of France.’

Margot said goodbye to the scientist and his wife, with an emotional farewell. They clasped hands and hugged each other like old friends. Margot had risked her life for them, and they knew it.

Hannah still wasn’t home, and Lizzie glanced at the clock. Nearly 9 p.m. The children were falling asleep on their parents’ knees.

‘Let’s get you to bed. You must all be exhausted,’ Lizzie said. It was too dangerous to leave them in the kitchen in case someone came to the door and heard them talking.

Earlier, Lizzie had hastily arranged a makeshift bed for them in the basement. She had taken a thick rug from one of the bedrooms and dragged it down the stairs. Then she arranged blankets and pillows on top of it. It was far from a decent mattress, but it would have to do. It was such a shame she couldn’t offer them one of the comfortable bedrooms, but it would be far too risky if someone suspected and came to check the house.

Hannah had shown her how to access the camouflaged basement where she stored Resistance supplies from London. It was lucky she did.

The last thing Lizzie had expected was she would hide a family of four down there for the night.

How would she get them to safety?

CHAPTER 20

Elise, the French housekeeper who had been with the King family since Jack was a boy, opened the door to 32b Grosvenor Place, and beamed when she saw him. He dropped light kisses onto her crepey cheeks, and she clasped both his hands in hers, then stepped back slightly to look at him.

‘We were talking about you only this morning. You’re a handsome devil in that uniform. What a magnificent surprise!’

Jack visited as often as he could, but time was tight. The SOE was all-consuming, and when Lizzie was in London, they spent as much time together as the job allowed. It was tricky juggling the logistics of their families and work, whilst keeping their relationship a secret.

Now Lizzie was in Paris, he had more time on his hands, but he seemed to spend most of it glued to the wireless listening for call signals.

His mother’s melancholic brown eyes lit up at the sight of her eldest son, and he was glad he had reorganised his morning to visit. It was too easy to let work take priority over family. Nicole was dressed immaculately in a tailored skirt and silk blouse and looked effortlessly elegant, as usual.

‘Are you going somewhere nice today, Maman?’ Jack asked, accepting a cup of tea from Elise, even though his mother always dressed as though she were having lunch with the prime minister.

‘There’s a women’s group meeting this afternoon, and I promised I would attend. You’re lucky to catch me. I was thinking of leaving early to pop to the shops, but that can wait until tomorrow. It’s so good to see you, darling. I bet you’re turning some heads in that uniform.’

It was only the second time Jack had worn his captain’s uniform to visit his mother, and she still wasn’t used to the sight of him in his military garb.

They chatted about the recent heavy raids in Portsmouth and Cardiff, and then the conversation turned naturally to Jack’s brother Henry, who was a pilot in the RAF.

‘He telephoned last week, and we talked for a few minutes before he was called away,’ Nicole said. ‘It was so lovely to hear from him.’

Jack heard the emotion in his mother’s voice, and his heart twisted. Nicole had borne widowhood gracefully, but the sadness was never far beneath the surface. Jack wished he could do more to cheer her, but she worried about Henry, which was only natural when he was on the front line in the skies, defending Britain.

Jack tried not to think about the worst happening to his younger brother, but the inevitable fears often crept into his mind, usually in the darkest hours of the night when he was alone. Some of Jack’s colleagues had lost siblings and sons in the Battle of Britain, and it was a blessing Henry had survived the daily dog fights over the channel. Too many pilots in his brother’s squadron had plummeted to their deaths defending Britain against the full-scale Luftwaffe attacks on England, intended to smooth the way for a German seaborne invasion.

Fortunately, they had failed, and Henry had lived.

‘Oh, that’s good. I haven’t caught up with him for a few weeks. How is he?’

Nicole frowned. 'He said he's keeping well, and everything is fine, but I'm certain he wouldn't tell me even if it wasn't. You know how he is. How do you think he's coping with the stress of it all? He's been on active duty for so long now.'

Jack finished his tea and rested the porcelain cup on the table. 'He's fine, Maman. It's a difficult time for everyone, but he loves flying and doing his bit. Try not to worry so much.'

Nicole's lips formed a weak smile. 'You're right, of course, but it's just so dangerous. He flies most days, you know.'

Jack nodded. 'I know, but the worst of it is over. Henry is a true hero—if it weren't for skilled, dedicated pilots like him, we would have lost the Battle of Britain, and Hitler and his mob would be on our shores. I wouldn't be surprised if he's awarded a medal. Not much time for accolades now, but they will come.'

'He certainly deserves a medal, but I'd gladly just have our boy back without any of that. On the radio last week, they talked of the RAF conducting Fighter Sweeps over occupied Europe. The whole thing sounded terrifying, and it only seems to get more so every time I listen.'

Jack squeezed his mother's hand. 'Stop listening to the broadcasts if they upset you.'

'That's what Elise says,' Nicole said, a wry smile on her lovely face.

'She always was smart. Listen to the cheerful programmes instead of the war broadcasts. Thinking too much about what's happening is enough to depress anyone.'

Jack knew that too well and wished he would follow his own advice.

Elise tapped on the door and entered, bearing a tray of freshly baked cake. She poured them another round of tea and served the cake, apologising as she always did that it was not up to her pre-war standards.

‘I don’t know how you do it, but you produce such delicious goodies even in this dire rationing situation. You’re a true marvel,’ Jack said, shaking his head in between bites of sponge.

‘Oh, you. You’re making me blush!’ She laughed, overjoyed by his enthusiastic praise.

After more tea and cake, and more chatting, Jack finally rose and said he must get back to the office.

‘Any news of Hannah?’ his mother asked.

‘Yes, there is actually. Not much I can tell you, but last I heard, she’s well.’

‘Thank goodness. When this awful war is over, I plan to throw a marvellous big wedding for Henry and Hannah.’

Jack smiled. ‘What a lovely idea, Maman. Keep thinking those happy thoughts, rather than listening to too many broadcasts. Promise me?’

Nicole agreed she would do as he asked, and then walked him to the door, her arm tucked in his. She turned and gave him a tight hug. ‘You look handsome but tired, my boy. That job is wearing you out. Now you promise me something. Take it easier, please, and get some rest.’

Jack laughingly promised he would, and his mother kissed him and waved him off, her brown eyes shining bright with unshed tears.

Jack had another duty to perform that chilly afternoon, so he walked quickly to Baker Street and organised a car. It seemed wasteful to get someone to drive him, and he enjoyed driving himself when he could. It would give him a chance to think clearly about the Paris mission.

He weaved the car out of London and headed west towards Oxfordshire. As he wound through the country lanes, his mind ticked over with thoughts of Lizzie's latest message he had decoded. Paris was now on German time, so it would be 2 p.m. there and he wondered what she was doing.

What had happened to the scientist she mentioned, and how had she got involved? It sounded like a recipe for disaster, and he didn't like it one bit. In the back of his mind, he was prepared to fly into France on a moment's notice if he didn't hear from her again in the next day or two.

The waiting around every day was tortuous, and he had to keep reminding himself that this was the nature of espionage, and wartime espionage was even more tense. Things either happened at a snail's pace, and you needed the patience to wait it out without losing your nerve, or the situation escalated into an emergency and before you knew what was happening, you had to take immediate action.

Whatever it was, he was on standby and ready for it. Lizzie was determined to carry out her duties, but the mission weighed heavily on his heart, and he would hold himself responsible if something went wrong.

The car entered the pretty market town of Henley-on-Thames just as the pale wintery sun showed its face and glimmered on the surface of the River Thames.

Jack parked the car next to a pile of sandbags and hurried into town towards the post office, wishing he'd worn his coat.

Lizzie had asked him to post her first card to her family shortly after she left, so they wouldn't worry when she didn't call them. He extracted the handwritten postcard that featured a picture of the Henley stone-arched bridge from his pocket, running his fingers over the text as he read.

Dearest Ma, Pa, Juliet & Evie,

I hope you are all keeping well. This is just a short note to let you know I've settled into the job at the nursing home in Henley. The veterans are cheered to have someone to translate for them as they try to rebuild their lives. It's a lovely, quiet market town, and I'm enjoying the work. The food isn't too bad either!

Missing you, as always. Please look after yourselves. I will write again as soon as I can.

All my love,

Lizzie xxx

p.s If you want to drop me a line, remember to write to the Baker Street address. They will forward it on to me.

CHAPTER 21

Lizzie shot up from the sofa at the sound of a light tap. She froze near the back door as she listened for clues of who might be outside.

Had someone followed Margot and knew she had moved the family? Lizzie crept towards the kitchen counter and silently withdrew a knife from the wooden stand that sheathed its sharp blade. Then she heard another louder knock, followed by a third, and she rushed to the door to open it.

‘My God! Why didn’t you knock three times straightaway? I nearly had a heart attack,’ Lizzie said, her voice low despite her state of panic.

There were no nearby neighbours, but she’d learned to communicate as if someone might always be listening.

‘Sorry, sorry,’ Hannah said, wiping her boots on the mat and raising her eyes to meet Lizzie’s. Her nose and cheeks glowed red from the cold air. ‘It’s icy, and I lost my footing. I didn’t mean to scare you.’

‘I’m so relieved you’re home. It seems like a lifetime since you left this morning!’ Lizzie said.

‘It’s been a long day. You can put that away now,’ she said, assessing the big knife Lizzie clutched.

Lizzie rolled her eyes. ‘I had visions of having to stop the Gestapo from raiding the

place.’

Hannah shrugged out of her coat and moved into the kitchen in search of warmth.

‘It’s late. I didn’t know what to think. Have you eaten? I can warm up the rest of the soup if you haven’t.’ Lizzie paused, smiling wryly. ‘I sound just like my mother.’

‘Well, it’s been a long time since I had any mothering, so I don’t mind at all. I’ll just take some tea though if there’s some on offer. I’m not hungry—I ate in the canteen, so at least that’s something good about working in that hellhole.’

‘Was it awful?’ Lizzie asked as she crossed back to the counter to replace the knife and make more tea, her heart gradually beating to a slower rhythm.

‘It’s not my idea of a nice day out, that’s for sure, but it’s quite a triumph for us to infiltrate their High Command. I’ve been thinking of this day for months.’ Hannah accepted the tea, and they sat at the table as she warmed her hands on the cup.

‘ You infiltrated their High Command. The rest of us can’t take credit for any of it. Honestly, I don’t know how you pulled it off. I’m not sure I would even imagine such a bold plan.’

Hannah sipped the tea. ‘Tell me what you’ve been up to all day. I kept thinking about you and Francois. How did your meeting go?’

Lizzie reassured her that all was fine with Francois, and the next railway sabotage operation was planned for the following week.

‘Excellent. Not a bad first day holding the fort then? Well done, you. I know it’s a lot to expect of you to pick up my activities like this. ’

Lizzie shifted in her seat and lowered her voice to a whisper. 'I'm happy to do it, but there's something I must tell you.'

'What?' Hannah asked, matching Lizzie's whisper. 'Are you alright?'

Lizzie nodded. 'I'm fine, it's not about me.'

'What then?' Hannah asked, frowning.

'Your contact, Margot, was here early this morning, not long after you left for work.'

Hannah's blue eyes widened, no longer hidden behind her thick glasses. 'I told her not to come unless it was an emergency.'

'That's just it. It was an emergency,' Lizzie said. 'I didn't feel I had any choice, and I couldn't reach you to check.'

'Tell me what happened.'

'It's probably better if I show you,' Lizzie replied, grabbing the small torch from the table. She stood and beckoned for Hannah to follow her down the steps to the basement. The cold was oppressive, the lower they went, and she hoped she had given the family enough blankets to keep warm.

Lizzie shone the torch in front of them until they both stood by the door.

'What's going on?' Hannah whispered. 'Is it the wireless? Do you need me to help you send a message to Raven? It works best from the attic.'

Lizzie shook her head and tapped on the door. 'May we come in? I've brought someone to see you.' A muted voice replied, and Lizzie opened the door and peeped

her head into the damp basement. She entered, and Hannah followed.

Lizzie turned to look at Hannah and gestured towards the family, who were huddled on the floor in the pile of blankets. Steam rose into the biting cold air as Lizzie breathed.

‘Who do we have here?’ Hannah asked, surprise on her face, as her eyes focused in the dim light and she made out the silhouettes of the visitors. The little girl moved slightly, clutching her teddy bear, her rosy cheeks like red apples as she continued sleeping.

The man stood and introduced himself and his wife. ‘Thank you for letting us stay. Margot said we could trust you. We know you’re taking an enormous risk helping us.’

Lizzie explained the situation to Hannah, who spoke briefly to the couple and assured them they were welcome, and they would do all they could to keep them safe.

After a pause, Hannah continued, ‘The thing is, you can’t stay here for long. They’ll be searching for you.’

The scientist looked wretched as he ran his hand through his messy, dark hair. ‘I will give myself up. They won’t search for my family—it’s me they want. I’ve turned this over and over in my mind and it’s the only thing I can think of to keep them safe.’

His wife made a sound like a wounded animal and touched his arm. ‘No, Isaac...’ Tears filled her eyes, and Lizzie saw she was at breaking point. Who knew what this family had already suffered?

‘You promised we’d stay together,’ she continued, finding her voice and speaking with conviction.

‘My love, I know,’ Isaac said, His voice cracked as he clasped his wife’s hand. ‘But I don’t see how we can. If I give myself up, they’ll leave you in peace.’

‘No, mon chéri . Please, no.’ The tears streamed down her face now as she beseeched her husband not to leave them.

The tears spilled from his eyes too, and Lizzie was overcome with emotion, and swallowed several times to keep her composure.

Hannah’s voice sounded low and clear. ‘Isaac, I understand why you think that. In any other situation, it might be so, but not now. We are dealing with monsters. There is no safe place for Jews in France and even if you surrender to them and give them what they want, it’s only a matter of time until they come for your wife and children, too. When you’ve given them what they wanted....’ Hannah’s voice tailed off and she cleared her throat. ‘Believe me, I wish it weren’t so, but this is history repeating itself.’

Isaac looked at Hannah, questions in his eyes.

She uttered just one word. ‘Germany.’

And he nodded, immediately understanding the significance of what had befallen the German Jewish communities and others the SS labelled as undesirables in the thirties.

‘The same will follow here, then,’ he said, his voice hopeless and flat. ‘We have heard the stories, of course. Some of the Jews who got out of Germany fled here, so now the same horror is to befall them all over again?’

Hannah nodded. ‘I’m sorry, but there’s no easy way to say it. We must get you and your family out of France before it’s too late.’

‘Maman,’ muttered the little girl, her sleepy eyes opening as she searched for her mother, who bent down to stroke her daughter’s hair and soothe her back to sleep.

‘How can we escape? Is there even a way? We don’t have any money. We had to flee our home and leave behind everything we own. If I go to our bank, they will report me to the authorities.’

Hannah touched his arm. ‘I know of a way to get you out. Let us all rest now and talk about it in the morning.’

When they climbed the steps back to the kitchen, Hannah turned to Lizzie. ‘Now I understand why you were expecting the Gestapo. Goodness, what a first day you had.’

CHAPTER 22

Lizzie and Hannah rose at dawn and curled up under blankets on the sofa to keep out the numbing cold.

They drank hot, bitter coffee and talked in hushed tones.

‘I’ve been wondering. How did you find this house?’ Lizzie asked, her eyes still groggy from sleep.

‘It was through a series of coincidences and a friend of the Resistance. Terrible for the family who had to leave, but fortunate for us. My contact arranged the documents for me to show I live here legally if anyone comes knocking.’

‘That’s good to know, and fortunate indeed.’

‘Yes, it gave me a legitimate address for the German High Command job. What better proof of a Reich-loving citizen than snapping up a Jewish-owned house?’

‘I wonder where they are now,’ Lizzie said.

‘Hopefully somewhere far from Europe. Perhaps they made it to America.’ Hannah released a heavy sigh. ‘Talking of people on the run, we can’t have our guests staying for long. A family was not what I thought to find down there last night!’

Lizzie said, ‘I’m sorry about that. You’ve got so much to handle already. I didn’t know what else to do, and Margot was desperate. She said her neighbours are

informers.'

'No, don't be sorry. You did what you had to do. Sadly, there is no shortage of neighbours looking for an opportunity to line their pockets and ingratiate themselves with the Reich.'

'Isn't having them here a decent hiding place? I imagine the last house they'd expect to find a Jewish family in the basement is in the home of the secretary to a high-ranking official at German High Command.'

'Let's hope so, but still, it's no way for children to live, those little angels. They need fresh air and exercise. Also, let's keep in mind I've only been in the job one day. I certainly won't be on any of the official most trusted lists!'

Lizzie nodded. 'I still can't believe we need to hide them. My mother says people really thought the First War with Germany was the war to end all wars. Now here we are at war again, not much over twenty years later.'

'If I hadn't seen what they did to Jews in Germany, and anyone else who didn't fit into their twisted Aryan vision, I would have trouble believing it, too. Mark my words, they are just another family they mean to dispose of. Even if Isaac gives them the research they want, they'll still send him to a camp or blow his brains out when they're done with him.'

Lizzie's eyes widened as she processed Hannah's words. 'You must have seen so many terrible things when you were in Berlin.'

'I try not to think of it much, but seeing that poor family brings it all rushing back.'

'I'm so sorry,' Lizzie said, her eyes welling up.

‘From what I hear, it is likely my family was murdered, or they are rotting away in a camp somewhere, so I don’t hold out hope. We won’t find out who survived until this war is over, and who knows how many prisoners will make it through to that day? The Allies must win, or thousands, perhaps even millions, will never know what happened to their family and friends.’

Lizzie didn’t press for more details when Hannah changed the subject. She couldn’t imagine how devastating it must be to not know, for years, if your loved ones were alive or dead.

Hannah explained a rough plan for the escape of the scientist’s family in the basement. It was more daring than anything Lizzie had heard, but she wasn’t surprised. Hannah was known for her daring ops, and a part of her was thrilled to be here to witness her in action.

They took what they had down to the family for breakfast and the children hopped and chirped like little birds, despite their dismal surroundings. Lizzie entertained them whilst Hannah outlined the plan for their parents.

‘How did they take it?’ Lizzie asked when they were back upstairs.

‘Quite well, considering what they’ll have to do. His wife is so grateful he isn’t turning himself in she would agree to anything. At least they have a chance of survival like this.’

‘And Isaac, what did he say?’

‘He’s concerned about how his wife and children will manage to cross the Pyrenees in these freezing conditions.’

‘A valid concern,’ Lizzie said. ‘Has anyone made it over the border into Spain via

that route?’

Hannah nodded. ‘Yes, we got two airmen out that way recently. The journey is treacherous, but it’s better than staying in France, like sitting ducks waiting to be shot.’

Hannah explained more details to Lizzie about the workings of the Liberty Network, and then they both hurried to get ready to leave.

When Hannah reappeared, Lizzie stared. ‘Even in that frumpy get-up and schoolteacher glasses, you’re still a knockout.’

‘You’re not helping!’ Hannah smiled. ‘Agents must be unremarkable to blend in. The only knocking out I plan to do is more of a violent nature...’

‘Well, you do a terrific job with your disguises. The blonde hair and blue eyes are a lucky combination for undercover work at the Reich. All I’m saying is, don’t be shocked if you attract suitors.’

Lizzie was still surprised when she looked in the mirror and saw her new blonde hair. Hannah said it suited her green eyes and they really could pass for sisters.

They rode away from the farmhouse in silence on their bicycles, both thinking about the desperate family in the basement who had nothing but each other and a slim chance of escaping the Nazis.

Lizzie and Hannah cycled as fast as they could to get warm in the icy morning air. When they reached the city, they parted with just a nod. Hannah continued towards German High Command and Lizzie followed Hannah’s directions to the shops to buy food with their ration coupons. With six mouths to feed, she needed to be successful.

Waiting in line for supplies in Paris was just as tiresome as it had been in Reims, except instead of melting beneath the blazing noon sun, now she was shaking from cold and could barely feel her fingers and toes. She wondered how Jeanne, her friend in Reims, was doing.

One of the most difficult things about this work was you forged incredible bonds with people so quickly, but then you had to leave them behind. It was heart wrenching, and Lizzie hoped she would see Jeanne again. Perhaps she was reading another agent's tea leaves like she had read hers in the cosy cottage near the vineyards, which was Lizzie's first safe house.

Lizzie waited for hours in the queue, and when she finally reached the front, the shopkeeper handed her a small, wrapped portion of chicken and some margarine. She asked if he had any eggs, and he laughed, as if she'd told him the funniest joke, but there was a bitter look in his eyes. 'Let me know if you find some,' he said. 'I haven't seen any for weeks.'

Lizzie began queueing again in the shop next door. Vegetables weren't rationed, but it was still a hell of a fight to get any. After another tiresome but uneventful wait, she left the shop, ecstatic she'd got a swede and a cabbage. The children in the basement were in her mind constantly, and the thought of being able to cook a decent meal for them spurred her on.

By now, the chill had penetrated her bones. Just one more errand and she could leave. She followed Hannah's instructions and found the café she had told her to visit. At least she could have a hot drink before making the journey back to the farmhouse with her hard-won supplies. The sky was gunmetal grey, and snow floated on the air like particles of icing sugar.

The café was warmer than outside, but she kept her coat on and sat at an empty table next to the window, overlooking the river like Hannah instructed her. There was only

a handful of customers, and she was relieved she didn't have to go into one of the busier establishments the soldiers from the Paris barracks frequented. She'd seen them loitering in the entrance of a café and heard them whistling at French women, trying to catch their attention.

Lizzie drank her coffee and gazed out of the window at the swirling snow that formed magical shapes pirouetting along the choppy surface of the Seine. The Eiffel Tower draped in snowflakes was like a scene from a Christmas card, and the sight enchanted Lizzie as the warmth brought her senses back to life.

Lizzie wore a red coat and matching beret that Hannah had lent her and told her to wear for this meeting.

'It's the sign for the contact I told you about. I won't have time to meet with him now because of my job, so you must go in my place. He should recognise you by my coat and hat. I told him someone else would meet with him. Remember, don't speak to him unless he uses the special code, and he matches the description I gave you.'

Ten minutes passed, and the contact didn't enter the café. The snow was swirling more heavily now, and Lizzie hoped he would still appear, or she would need to return tomorrow. The more times she waited in the same place, the more dangerous it became. She had learnt she must blend into her surroundings, and returning in the same outfit would be riskier, especially as the café wasn't busy.

Another ten minutes had passed, Lizzie noted as she glanced at her watch whilst she pretended to be absorbed in reading a discarded newspaper. The light was fading fast, and the snowy afternoon was already transforming into dusk. Lizzie decided she would wait another ten minutes and then leave. Hannah had warned her the contact might not make it and she shouldn't stay longer than half an hour.

The door opened and Lizzie raised her head and cast her eyes over the new customer

to see if he matched the description of the contact. She did a double take before she could stop herself. Then her eyes darted downwards, and she buried her head in the newspaper, praying the man hadn't recognised her. Footsteps crossed the café, and she heard a pleasant voice greet the proprietor.

Lizzie clutched her hands together beneath the table and pretended to read. Her heart clattered in her chest, when the voice she had heard before and had hoped never to hear again echoed over her shoulder.

‘What a magnificent surprise to see you here, madame.’

CHAPTER 23

The officer loomed over Lizzie, and she couldn't pretend she hadn't seen him any longer.

'You remember me, I hope?' he said, his handsome face creasing into a charming grin.

She managed a tentative smile in return. 'Ah, good afternoon, of course I remember you. How could I forget you when you were so kind to me on the train?'

The proprietor walked towards them holding a tray, and the officer nodded to him. 'Thank you, Claude.'

'May I join you? I come bearing gifts,' he said, turning to Lizzie, pointing to the tray laden with fancy cakes.

She gulped. 'Really, that's so thoughtful, but I was just leaving. I have dinner to prepare,' she said, pointing to her bag of meagre produce.

The officer looked disappointed. 'Can I not tempt you with one of these cakes and some hot chocolate? Claude's is the very best Paris has to offer.'

It might be the best Paris offered to a Nazi officer, but there were no cakes in sight for ordinary French people.

'Forgive me, madame, I am letting my enthusiasm at seeing you again affect my

manners, and that is unpardonable.'

He seemed as genuinely decent as he was on the train, and Lizzie considered how she could extract herself without being rude. There was no benefit to offending a German officer who wasn't a threat, and he was, after all, just offering her cake.

Beware of friendly Nazis , Hannah's ominous warning echoed in Lizzie's thoughts.

Lizzie scrambled to her feet. 'Please take my table,' she said, looking from the officer to the proprietor, who was still waiting rather comically for the instruction of where to put the tray. 'I really must go before it gets dark, especially in this awful weather.'

'But madame, please don't tell me you mean to walk home in this snow. I simply cannot allow it. You will catch your death.'

'No, no, you misunderstand. I am not walking. It's no problem at all—I have a good bicycle and am used to making the journey.'

Claude placed the tray on the table and returned to tend to his new customers.

The cakes looked so inviting, but the officer remained standing next to Lizzie, and he slapped his hand on his leg. 'That settles it, then. Please, madame, join me for a short while. Enjoy the cake and chocolate and then I will see that you arrive home safely. You have my word. No one should travel alone in this snowstorm. It is almost dark.'

Lizzie found herself in a dilemma. A straggle of customers had entered to escape the increasing flurries of snow, and she and the officer were attracting attention by standing around like this. Rule number one when undercover was never to attract attention. This outing was quickly turning sour, and she hadn't even met the contact she'd come to see.

The officer was genuinely bewildered that she would prefer to leave the warmth of the café and decline his offer of cake and a comfortable ride home.

What would Hannah do in this situation?

An image of the fearless Resistance operative flooded her consciousness, and Lizzie knew what to do.

‘You are very courteous, and I see it would be ungrateful of me to refuse your offer. Thank you,’ she said.

The officer looked overjoyed and reached to pull out the chair for her.

Lizzie sank back down onto the hard seat. She would indulge his wishes for a short while and then she would make an excuse and leave on her own, as if she had nothing at all to hide.

That was what Hannah would do.

The officer had ordered enough pastries and cakes for a large family, and she chose one when he insisted.

‘Which is your favourite, madame? You must try them all.’

‘Oh really, I can’t. We are not used to so much food.’

A shadow passed over his face and he looked embarrassed. ‘I am so sorry the Parisians struggle to get enough food, and that is your experience of this war. That you are going without so that my men may eat troubles me greatly. What may I do to improve the situation for you?’

The officer stared at her intently and didn't touch his cake or drink his cup of steaming chocolate.

Lizzie said, 'Nothing, thank you. You've done quite enough already. This apple cake is delicious, but I didn't mean to imply that I want or need more. I am fine, really.'

'Still, I insist on giving you cake to take home for your family. '

'It's just me and my sister,' Lizzie said carefully, skirting around the dangerous truth.

'I couldn't help but notice your wedding ring when you were on the train. Where is your husband if I may ask?'

Lizzie put the rest of the cake back on her plate, lowered her head slightly, and composed her face into a mournful expression. 'I do not know. There has been no news of him since early in the war.'

'I am sorry for you, madame. These times are difficult for everyone. May you hear he is well soon.'

What did one say to the enemy when they wished your imaginary husband, who had presumably been fighting for the Allies, well?

'Thank you,' Lizzie said, reaching for her cake again. The sponge was light and fluffy and if she wasn't in a panic, she would devour it, but the crumbs stuck in her throat, and she coughed.

The officer was solicitous and immediately asked for water.

His eyes searched hers. 'How rude of me! I have not yet introduced myself, and this is already our second meeting. My name is Karl, Major General Karl Schulz.'

Lizzie was relieved she was holding her cup, and he didn't offer her his hand to shake. It was bad enough for a French woman to be seen in a café with a German officer, never mind touching each other.

The place was filling up now and Lizzie noticed a few French women on the arms of German soldiers, and her breathing steadied.

'And you, madame. May I have the pleasure of knowing your name?' This was what Lizzie had been trying to avoid, but there was no way out now, so she introduced herself as Jacqueline Simon and acted as naturally as she could, even though her heart raced uncontrollably .

The realisation that she was sitting in a café in the centre of Paris, sharing cake with a Nazi officer through no design of her own, troubled her.

'Staying with your sister must be pleasant for you both.'

Lizzie agreed it was, and they were fortunate to have each other's company. She said they lived a quiet life, hoping to discourage any more questions.

After they finished their cups of chocolate and Lizzie had eaten all the cake, she could force down her dry, nervous throat, Karl asked Claude to wrap up the remaining cakes for her to take home.

Lizzie thought she detected judgement in Claude's eyes, but she couldn't be sure. Who was he to judge her when he was serving the finest cakes in Paris to the occupying army?

She reached for her bag containing the all-important rationed supplies, but the officer jumped to his feet. 'Please, this way. My driver is just around the corner, madame.'

The officer was polite and even though he knew her name, she noticed he still addressed her solely as madame.

Lizzie's thoughts tangled with one another, and she couldn't think straight as she desperately tried to come up with a believable excuse to refuse a lift home on this dark, freezing, snowy evening.

'No really, I have my bicycle nearby and am perfectly fine to ride home. Please do not take yourself and your driver out of your way. I'm certain you must have much more important things to do.'

Karl moved closer, and his voice was low. 'I understand, madame, that you must protect your reputation at all costs, and I apologise for any inconvenience I have caused you today. In all good faith, I cannot allow myself to abandon you like this when I could, with a simple act of decency, see you home safely.'

The situation was becoming untenable, and she frantically searched for a good reason to refuse his offer again, but she failed to conjure anything that didn't sound like she had something to hide.

The officer must have seen her resigned expression. 'You may rest assured, I will escort you with the utmost discretion and if you never wish to see me again, I will honour your wish. Now, madame, where is your bicycle to be found? You leave first and wait for us on the next street. I forget the name. Rue ... ah, but of course, you are even newer to Paris than me. It's the small street that runs next to this one. Turn right when you exit the café, turn first right again and wait by the small bookshop. We will meet you there.'

Lizzie's mind was humming. There was no point in making a fuss. This was the quickest way to get rid of him, so she processed his instructions and said goodbye as if they were parting.

He whispered in her ear. 'It is dark now. No one will see you. There is nothing to fear.'

Was she making a mistake to trust him? What if he didn't have a man waiting for him at all, and he meant to force himself on her?

Memories of the previous summer surfaced, and fear clawed at her stomach.

No. Trust your gut and live by your wits. Jack's wise words resounded in her mind. That's what she was doing and there was a voice within her—when she allowed herself to tune into it—that told her Karl meant her no harm.

She retrieved her bag and after telling him where she had parked her bicycle, Lizzie stepped out of the warm café and into the sleet and snow that rushed into her face, making her wince.

It really was a terrible night for cycling and she wished she had got away much earlier and not bumped into the officer. As charming and well-meaning as he was, making friends with him could only spell trouble.

Lizzie waited beneath the awning of the bookshop. Guilt washed over her as she remembered how she had feasted on the cake whilst the family waited in the basement. She had intended to have a vegetable and chicken stew bubbling on the stove for them by now.

In the dim streetlights, Lizzie saw a German army truck turn the corner and pull up slowly alongside the bookshop. Her bicycle was strapped to the back at an awkward angle. The door clicked open, Karl's face appeared through the window, and he signalled for her to get in. She realised he was honouring his promise of discretion.

Lizzie climbed into the backseat of the truck, and Karl's driver pulled smoothly

away. They wound through the snowy streets, and people hurried out of their way as they appeared. This was Paris through the eyes of the occupier, and Lizzie was riding with the enemy.

The driver asked for her address and Lizzie realised this was her last chance to avoid leading the Nazis to the Resistance safe house door. She considered giving them a fake address and getting out somewhere else, but she had made that mistake before, and it had proved fatal. She wouldn't repeat it.

Hide in plain sight.

Sometimes that was the best way.

The snow was sticking, and she thought again of the family in hiding as she looked out of the window. How would they make it over the Pyrenees in these arctic conditions?

'Madame, are you quite comfortable?' Karl asked.

She nodded. 'Yes, thank you.'

As they turned another corner, Lizzie caught sight of a sign: "Germany Is Winning On All Fronts! "

They bounced along the road to the outskirts of the city, the wheels of the large truck handling the snow and ice with ease. It wasn't long before they turned off the road and rumbled down the country lane towards the farmhouse.

The farmhouse where a hunted Jewish family were at this very minute hiding in the basement. The farmhouse where the Resistance leader of the Liberty Network lived.

Lizzie had brought a Nazi officer right to their door.

CHAPTER 24

Lizzie had fallen into something of a rhythm during the past few weeks. Hannah left for work early each morning, and her days passed quickly, carrying out the various duties to support the network. She was in and out of the house a lot and cycled into the city most days under the guise of shopping, but she also met with members of Hannah's team.

As she washed the breakfast dishes, her mind wandered back to the snowy evening when the Nazi officer had driven her home. Hannah told her that when she saw the German army truck pull into the front yard, she had rushed downstairs and called out to warn the Stern family not to make so much as a sound because the house was about to be searched. Then she flew back upstairs and shoved on her thick-rimmed glasses and frumpy cardigan, ready to play the role of the major general's personal secretary. She wouldn't go down without a fight, and if her disguise failed, she had her gun loaded and ready.

When Lizzie opened the front door with her key, entered and closed the door behind her, shutting out the whirling snowstorm, Hannah stared at her, speechless.

The sound of the truck pulling away made her weak with relief and she leant against the wall for support. 'What the blazes? I thought you were in the hands of the Gestapo, and we were all headed for the torture chamber at Avenue Foch.'

'Sorry about that. I got myself into a bit of a bind. I didn't want to scare you and hoped you wouldn't see the truck.'

‘Scare me? You put the fear of the devil into me! I thought it was all over. What on earth happened for them to escort you home like your own Nazi concierge service?’

Lizzie removed her snow flecked damp beret and coat and hung them on the hooks in the hallway to dry. Then she took Hannah’s arm and steered her into the warm kitchen. It wasn’t often she got to be the one who offered Hannah solace, but Lizzie saw her sister in arms was badly shaken.

Lizzie explained how she couldn’t find a way out of the situation without seeming like she had something to hide.

‘Makes sense. I probably would have done the same in the circumstances,’ Hannah said, the colour slowly returning to her cheeks. ‘Now we must let the Sterns know it’s safe to breathe again! Poor things.’

‘Wait, I’ve got something lovely for them.’ Lizzie produced her bag and extracted the groceries one by one and laid them on the table. ‘I’m back late to cook dinner, but I’ve got a surprise for you all to take the edge off your hunger.’

‘What surprise?’ Hannah said. ‘I think I’ve had enough surprises for one day.’

Lizzie laughed. ‘You’ll like this one. The officer had the proprietor of the café wrap up a delicious selection of cakes and pastries for me to bring home. Look.’

Hannah stuck her nose in the packet of baked goods and inhaled. ‘Ahh, they smell divine. I don’t remember when I last ate a dessert.’

‘Take one and let’s give the rest to the family.’

‘Is there enough? I won’t have one if not,’ Hannah said.

‘Yes, there’s plenty.’

Hannah helped herself to a buttery pastry. ‘I should say I’m not eating Nazi cake, but that would be stupid, wouldn’t it? I ate lunch in the Reich canteen today. Starving for my morals will help no one.’

Lizzie agreed and took the goodies down to the basement.

The Stern family looked scared, and she soothed them quickly, saying it had been a false alarm. The thought of what could have happened was too frightening to talk about in front of the children, and there was no reason to worry them further.

The children jumped up and down with glee, and soon, they were all sitting on a blanket, munching cake.

‘But how did you get hold of such wonderful delicacies?’ asked Sarah, their mother.

Lizzie said, ‘Let’s just say I had a good day at the shops.’

She lingered in the basement, talking to them for a while, her own spirits lifted at the sight of the children who were so thrilled because of a sweet treat. ‘I’ll go upstairs now and start cooking. There will be a stew for dinner. It shouldn’t be long.’

Sarah’s eyes shone in the lamplight and Lizzie saw she was fighting to hold back the tears. ‘Thank you so much for all you are doing. I can’t express how much this means to us.’ She nodded to the children who were buzzing about with the sugar rush, and Lizzie thought what a sad world it was where bringing a child a cake was considered a massive act of kindness.

She finished washing the dishes, and placed the clean cups to drain by the sink. She hadn’t seen or heard anymore of Karl since that eventful evening and had changed the

rendezvous point to a different café. She couldn't risk going back to Claude's and bumping into the officer again, no matter how charming and generous he was with his cake.

Hannah stood in front of the filing cabinet with her back to the door as she snapped photographs of documents with the tiny camera nestled in the palm of her hand. She still couldn't believe how amazing the camera was. This was the first day she had smuggled it into the building, hidden in the lining of her handbag. Any chance she got to extract intelligence to pass to SOE, she took. The camera made it much simpler, as she didn't have to jot down key facts or figures or try to memorise important data.

There was a price to pay, but she calculated it was worth it. If anyone so much as suspected her of spying, and discovered the camera, it would be incontrovertible evidence against her, so she was vigilant whenever anyone approached her.

Not that the Nazis needed evidence to condemn anyone. During her time working at German High Command, she had seen reports of people being arrested for much less than espionage. Hannah slipped the camera into her pocket and replaced the documents neatly in the folder, and closed the cabinet. The gadget gave her such an immense feeling of power, and she wondered how she'd managed without it. It was the perfect espionage camera.

Jack had arranged for the camera upon her request, and she frequently blessed her good luck that she had noticed it in the film, or she wouldn't have imagined such an incredible tool existed.

Hannah returned to her desk, feeling the camera burning a hole in her pocket. She must get it back into the secret compartment of her handbag. Just as she was contemplating how best to do it without being seen, the major general walked out of his office and over to her desk.

‘Yes, Major General,’ Hannah said, looking up at him through her thick glasses, her heart strumming wildly. ‘What may I do for you?’

The major general was immaculately dressed in his green-grey uniform, and his greedy eyes flickered over Hannah like they always did. He assessed her like a wildcat, wondering what to hunt for dinner. She did her best not to show how he revolted her.

‘Has anything new come in from the Staff?’

Hannah replied, ‘Nothing that I’ve seen, Major General. There is some new correspondence still to be sorted—it is next on my list to do.’

The major general continued to assess her, and all Hannah could think of was the incriminating camera film containing German Military Intelligence secrets in her pocket.

Did he suspect her of something? She feared he viewed her with suspicion despite the lust in his eyes.

She rose from her chair and smoothed down her skirt. ‘I will check the new correspondence immediately and bring you anything about the confiscation of Jewish art.’

‘Collette?’

‘Yes, Major General?’ In the beginning, she had addressed him respectfully as Herr Major General, but he had told her there was no need for that. ‘Major General will do. No need to waste words.’

That was the type of man he was, and she soon noticed he relished his rank and was

desperate for promotion. Everything he did was carefully thought through and designed to show him in his best light. The major general was a calculating individual who had set his sights on the general's job, and it was part of Hannah's role to help facilitate his advancement.

The thought of it made her sick to the stomach, and she had to remind herself why she was here and how important it was that she stick to her plan. She was in the best position to gain advance information about operations in Paris, and her data leaking had already paid off. Only last week, she had told Lizzie to meet with Francois in the park and tip him off about a last-minute change in troop and weapon movements. The result was he and Phillipe were in the right place at the right time to derail another train and stop it from reaching its planned destination.

The following morning, the major general had been in a foul mood and had smashed an expensive vase to smithereens in his office. He may be immaculately dressed, but Hannah already knew his weak point. The major general lost control of his anger when he was thwarted, and things didn't go his way.

'Come and clean this up immediately.' He shouted at Hannah and when she went in, she saw his hands were shaking and his face was bright red.

Yes, her new boss wasn't as cool and composed as he liked people to think. She was in his inner sanctum, and very few people saw him with his defences down.

That was the benefit of risking her life every day by working for one of the most high-ranking officers in Paris.

'Bring me a coffee before you go through the correspondence,' he snapped.

'Of course,' Hannah said in the deferential tone she was careful to use when she was around him. He must not suspect she burned with hatred for him and everything he

stood for, or her long-term plan to use his efforts to thwart him at every turn, would go down in flames along with her and the rest of the Liberty Network .

Hannah was patient. As she made his coffee in the way he liked it, spooning in the sugar and stirring it just as his former secretary had shown her, she imagined him stood against a wall in front of a firing squad. Like how the Nazis exterminated anyone who got in their way. The image was compelling, and it gave her the resolve to do what she had to do.

The major general's day of reckoning would come. She would make sure of that.

CHAPTER 25

The cold seeped into Lizzie's bones as she lay in wait on the hard bank of the railway track that ran through the rural outskirts of Paris. Francois had left her a sign that she should come on the next sabotage mission. She spotted his chalk mark signal on the trunk of the gigantic oak tree on her way home from the city with a few measly supplies in her bag for a light meal for her and Hannah.

Lizzie's thoughts wandered back to the Stern family as she peered through the gorse waiting for a sign to lay the explosives for the approach of the train.

Francois had smuggled the family out of the farmhouse in a borrowed truck and delivered them to a safe house in the seaside village of Ciboure. From there, a Basque guide was to take them over the Pyrenees.

Lizzie prayed they had made it into Spain. If they had escaped France, they were at least in with a chance of making it.

Meanwhile, Hannah was giving them frequent updates about planned weapon and troop movements via her role in German High Command, and the network was carrying out more sabotage operations than before.

It was still dusk, so the cape of darkness they usually relied upon when running clandestine operations did not conceal them, but they agreed this train was worth the risk.

Lizzie clutched her coat to her and moved her legs to keep from freezing. How she

longed for winter to be over, and the frost to melt away on the warm spring breeze, and the grass to reappear like a soft green carpet beneath her feet. The first shoots of spring would decorate the trees, blossom would transform the bushes into visions of loveliness fit for any painter's brush, and the birds would tweet their joyful songs, proclaiming spring's arrival.

Francois hissed. 'It's coming. Get ready.'

Lizzie's stomach dipped as she scrambled to her feet. She knew exactly what she had to do, but it didn't make it less frightening. Francois and Philippe had risen to Hannah's challenge and formed a lethal sabotage team in her absence. They had performed many successful operations all around the outskirts of Paris and sometimes far beyond. Lizzie usually passed on the intelligence and helped them fine tune the ops, but today they needed her on the team.

Lizzie rigged her explosives just as she'd done in her early training, and more recently, under Hannah's watchful eye.

Hannah had discovered in some of the top-secret documents she combed through in the office that the Wehrmacht had been ordered to stop using horns and whistles on trains carrying weapons and soldiers. It made them too easy to target and her boss, the sinister major general, dictated a report for Hannah to pass upline to his boss, the general, detailing what he described as the worrying increase in sabotage in recent months, performed by French traitors to the Reich .

It was tangible proof the Liberty Network was having success in sabotaging and destroying German operations.

Hannah and Lizzie celebrated with a bottle of expensive Burgundy the major general had given her as a thank you for her commitment to the job. Hannah had laughed so hard at the irony of toasting their success with wine from the enemy. She said her

boss's arrogance knew no bounds. He couldn't imagine anyone would dare to cross him.

Thinking of Hannah always gave Lizzie courage, but her heart pounded as she raced away from the track. Philippe followed, and Francois brought up the rear. Now they had to get out of the way of danger but stay close enough to gauge the effects of the explosion. They learnt from every operation and were fine tuning their skills and systems with each successful manoeuvre.

Lizzie turned to watch as Francois crossed the track, her heart pulsing as if it were in her throat. The chug and thud of the train wheels approaching was like a countdown, and she tried not to think about how many soldiers would die in just a few moments.

Then a loud boom rang through the air, and Lizzie peeped out of the dense foliage on the top of the bank, horrified as she watched Francois tumble to the ground. Philippe stood next to her and saw it, too.

'Merde,' he hissed.

'Shhh,' Lizzie said, barely making a sound as she prodded him and brought a finger to her lips.

Five young German soldiers with rifles poised to shoot approached Francois as he lay bleeding on the ground. Everything happened at once and they were outnumbered. The train approached and the noise of its wheels squealing on the tracks was deafening.

Lizzie stared as the soldiers waved frantically at the train, ordering it to perform an emergency stop. Then two of them bent to the ground and dragged Francois off the track, the others covering them, as they glanced backwards towards the screeching train.

A noise fizzed and popped. The soldiers recognised the sounds of an impending explosion, and ran for their lives, pulling Francois behind them and stopping near some bushes.

The train driver had slammed the brakes on, seeing the soldiers' warning just in time to stop before the packed train reached the rigged section of the railway. Lizzie saw the rails light up like a bonfire, followed by a loud cracking sound and several explosions. She held her hands to her ears as the fire ripped over the tracks, making it impassable.

Lizzie and Philippe stood like statues, not daring to move or make a sound. The soldiers were still visible, and it wouldn't take much for them to find them in hiding.

Francois lay on the ground. The soldiers had moved him far enough away, so he wasn't caught in the blast, but his gunshot wound could be fatal. Lizzie felt sick at the realisation he might die and there was no way for them to save their friend without being seen and putting the entire network in jeopardy. She stared at Philippe through the thickening dusk beneath the beautiful, orange-flecked sky, and he made a sign they must leave now.

It was heart wrenching to abandon Francois to the Germans, but if they didn't leave, they would be captured too. Soldiers swarmed out of the train and climbed up the bank to thank the heroes who had saved them. The smell of cigarette smoke bled into the freezing air as they talked about how they had most certainly cheated the jaws of death and would get to live another day.

Lizzie followed Phillipe out of the bushes, both treading as quietly as possible in their rubber soled boots. Francois had identified their quickest escape route before laying the explosives and now they used it to leave Francois bleeding on the frozen ground.

They slipped from the bushes and into the forest, not exchanging a word until they

had put some miles between them and the site of the catastrophic operation.

Eventually, they reached the spot where they'd hidden their bicycles. It was too difficult to ride through the dense forest, so they walked until the trees thinned and they could mount for a getaway.

A light snow was falling again, and Lizzie's hands shook as she pushed the pedals in a robotic movement. Her whole body fired on adrenaline as she raced out of the forest and reached Philippe in the clearing. She no longer felt the cold.

'What a disaster. I can't believe it,' Lizzie said.

'Oh, believe it. We knew this could happen.'

'It's a nightmare,' she whispered. 'Poor dear, Francois.'

'Francois was prepared for something like this, but yes, it's terrible. We are lucky to have got out alive, so we'd better make it count.'

Lizzie inhaled the chilled oxygen rich forest air, and a wave of clarity flooded her mind. 'We'll debrief when things calm down. We'd better get away before they comb the area.'

As if on cue, they heard voices in the distance, and they nodded to each other and cycled off in opposite directions. Lizzie reached the edge of the forest, and joined the road when she saw there was no one in sight, her wheels buffeting across the bumpy ground. She took the long way round and repeatedly checked she wasn't being followed before changing direction and heading toward the farmhouse.

'They've got Francois,' she said as she threw herself into the house through the back door, surprised to see Hannah already home.

CHAPTER 26

The colour drained from Hannah's face as she turned to Lizzie. 'What? How?'

Lizzie explained how the group of armed soldiers had appeared out of nowhere and gunned Francois down just as the train was approaching.

Hannah wrapped her arms around Lizzie as if she was holding herself up, and she rocked back and forth on her clumpy shoes. Her eyes reflected the pain Lizzie felt, and she whispered, 'Did they kill him?'

Lizzie removed her coat and sank onto the sofa, exhaustion gripping her muscles like a concrete vice. This was the first time she had stopped moving since they fled the scene, and now she was drained of energy.

'I don't know,' she said, her voice as faint as Hannah's. 'It's possible, but we couldn't wait to find out.'

Hannah sat down heavily next to Lizzie and took her hands, rubbing them in hers. 'My God, you're like ice.'

Lizzie started trembling, and the tears flooded her eyes and spilled onto her cold cheeks. She sobbed. 'I feel awful for leaving him, but there didn't seem another way.'

'No, you did the right thing—the only thing you could do, in fact. If you'd tried to rescue him, they would have mown you down too or hauled you off for

interrogation.'

Lizzie knew what Hannah said was true. She had followed procedure. The number one priority was to not get captured, so you couldn't be interrogated.

'Does Francois have a cyanide tablet?' Lizzie asked, sniffing.

'He does. Whether he had it on him or can take it is another matter. But he's smart.'

'I need to contact Jack immediately for orders,' said Lizzie.

Hannah crossed to the kitchen and made them some tea. 'You're in shock. You need something sweet, and I took some proper sugar from the canteen today. Here,' she said, passing the mug to Lizzie, who took it gratefully. 'You wouldn't believe how much food they have hanging around there for anyone to help themselves to. It's like a different world.'

Lizzie knew Hannah was trying to calm her down by chatting and taking her mind off what had happened to Francois. It helped, and she rested against the sofa and the hot sweet tea coursed through her chest and soothed her.

'How long do we have if Francois is alive, and they interrogate him?' Lizzie asked, raising her tear-stained face.

Hannah ran her hand over her scalp after freeing her blonde hair from the tight plaits. 'It depends. On so many factors. Who the interrogator is and how cruel their methods are. How strong willed the person being interrogated is and what state they are in, both mentally and physically.'

'How strong is Francois, do you think?'

‘Oh, he’s strong—stubborn as a mule—that one. He won’t make it easy for them. He’s loyal too. The Nazis gunned his parents down in front of him when France fell, so he has every motivation.’

Lizzie’s eyes widened. ‘How terrible, I didn’t know.’

‘Well, he’s not one to talk about it, but he makes up for it with action.’ Hannah paused, a shadow crossing her face. ‘It sounds heartless, but it might be better for him if he’s dead.’

Lizzie stared at Hannah. ‘Sometimes this just gets to be too much. I don’t know if I can handle it and I wonder who I’m fooling, pretending to be a tough SOE agent.’

Hannah nodded. ‘I know what you mean. It’s a crazy world, and it’s getting crazier every day, but our job, and the only job we need to focus on right now, is stopping the Nazis from carrying out their diabolical plans.’

‘How will we know what’s happened to Francois?’

‘That’s simple enough. If there’s a series of loud bangs on the door in the next few hours, we’ll know he’s talked.’

‘What should we do?’

‘You’d better leave, Lizzie. That’s what Jack will tell you to do.’

‘And what about you?’

‘He’ll tell me that, too,’ she said. ‘But I’ll ignore him. I’m not going anywhere. If there’s a chance I can stay undercover, it’s far too valuable to give up. If I run and find out later that Francois died after they shot him and the Gestapo know nothing

about us, it will have been the biggest wasted opportunity I've had to hit the Nazis in their soft underbelly. They don't even know I'm the enemy, and the longer I work there, the more documents I can access. I wish I'd done it sooner, like my gut was telling me to.'

'I don't want to leave you. That wouldn't be right. I'm here to support you and the network.'

'Dear Lizzie. You are the best friend I've had in a long time. What you've done for us here means so much, but I can't ask you to risk your life any more than you already have. You'd be disobeying orders, and you'll get in trouble even if you return to London to tell the tale. '

'Couldn't we find another safe house?' Lizzie asked.

'I'm sure we could, but that's not the real problem. If we're blown, they'll search for us everywhere and they'll have details about who we are and how we look. They may even have our cover names, so it'll all be over. But if we're not blown, I need to stay here. This is my cover address for the job, and I can't mess that up for nothing.'

Lizzie saw Hannah was resolute, and it was a waste of time trying to change her mind.

Hannah continued, 'You and I operate by different codes. I'm grateful to London for all they do to support the network, but ultimately, the responsibility is mine, and I would never forgive myself if I didn't do all I could to keep access to German High Command.'

Lizzie understood the dilemma, and she was torn.

'I had better contact Jack and explain what's going on. You're right, I need to get my

orders even if I don't like them.'

Lizzie hurried out of the room and up to the attic to retrieve the wireless from its hiding place. The Count of Monte Cristo lay beside it, and Lizzie quickly jotted down her coded message. It said:

Raven. Sabotage op gone bad. Man down. Don't know if alive or dead. Operation in the devil's lair is strong. Angel won't leave in case cover is not blown. I should stay too.

Seagrove.

The words felt so uncaring, but she daredn't risk saying how much she loved and missed him in case someone else decoded the message. She'd be compromising them both.

Lizzie waited; her heart wretched with emotions she could not express to Jack. There was no place for feelings in espionage. She was desperate to key in her message but unable to send anything until she got the go-ahead sign. It seemed like she waited forever, pacing about the dusty cold attic, but eventually the signal came, and she sent the message.

Lizzie was anxious to hear what Jack would say. She wanted to stay with Hannah, even though the vision of the Gestapo banging on their door tonight was a terrifying one. She didn't feel right leaving her, when Hannah was risking her life every day to gather intelligence to pass to the SOE.

Seagrove. Abort mission. Get out now. Pickup usual place and time tomorrow. Angel too.

Raven.

CHAPTER 27

Jack's message tugged at Lizzie's emotions. What he said made perfect sense. Leaving was the sensible thing to do. Before she returned downstairs, she stuffed the bulky wireless and novel back into the hidden compartment and wondered how she could get Hannah to leave with her.

'What did he say?' Hannah asked.

Lizzie told her he ordered them both to abandon the mission and to leave the farmhouse. 'He said he's arranging a pickup at the usual place for tomorrow night.' She paused. 'I don't know where that is. You could come with me...'

'I will explain or take you myself.'

Lizzie knew what Hannah would say before she said it, but she hoped she was wrong.

'I can't go now. I'm only just getting started. The office is a goldmine of information. You should get out now, though. I will figure out where you can stay and give you directions for the pickup.'

'Won't you reconsider?' Lizzie asked, conflicted between her loyalty to Jack and to Hannah. It didn't feel right to leave her, but it didn't feel right to disobey Jack's orders, either.

There was a rap at the door. They both jumped and stared at each other.

‘Expecting anyone?’ Lizzie whispered.

Hannah said, ‘No, did you hide the wireless?’

Lizzie nodded, panic shooting through her. ‘What shall we do?’

Hannah walked over to the window and peeked through the slit at the side of the blackout blinds. There was another louder knock, and she froze as if deciding whether to answer, before she strode to the door and turned the handle.

Lizzie stood watching, her heart bouncing in her chest, half expecting to see menacing Gestapo figures in trench coats.

The thoughts swirled through her mind. Had Francois been unable to hold out any longer? Was this the end of her time as a special agent? She remembered her trainers saying it would be a miracle for an SOE agent to survive longer than a few weeks in Nazi occupied territory, which is why they designed operations of the get-in, get-out style. Lizzie had defied the odds by staying longer, but maybe this was the day her luck ran out.

The tension drained from Lizzie’s body when she saw Margot, the lady who had begged her to take the Stern family in.

Hannah grabbed her arm and pulled her inside. ‘Thank goodness it’s you. Come in quickly. We might be blown.’

‘What happened?’ Margot asked. ‘You both look like you’ve seen a ghost.’

‘They’ve got one of ours. It’s better for you if you don’t know the details. What do you need?’ Hannah asked, her tone businesslike.

Margot said she had come to see if there was any news of the Sterns. 'I can't get them out of my head. Did they make it over the Pyrenees and into Spain?'

'You shouldn't have come just for that,' Hannah scolded. 'You're supposed to make contact only in an emergency.' Hannah's voice softened as she saw Margot's distraught expression on her lined face. 'I got word yesterday the Sterns made it to Spain. I don't know more than that.'

This was news to Lizzie, who had thought about the family's progress too. 'Will they be picked up from Gibraltar and taken back to London like the airmen you rescued?' she asked.

'I doubt it,' Hannah said, her voice flat. 'French Jews don't warrant the same treatment as British airmen.'

'So where will they go if not to England?' Lizzie asked.

'Who knows? Isaac said if they reach Spain, he will try to get a visa for America. I didn't discourage him, but it's a long shot, to say the least.'

Margot looked relieved and soon, she slipped out the back door and disappeared into the dark night like a phantom.

Lizzie and Hannah flopped onto the sofa.

'Thank God we're not blown,' Lizzie said.

'Yet...' Hannah said ominously. 'It's early days. If Francois is alive, he could crack at any moment, and they'll be all over us like a rash.'

'Does he know this address?'

‘No,’ Hannah said. ‘We’re careful about that kind of thing for this very reason. Margot has the address from an operation, but most of the network don’t know where I live.’

Lizzie said, ‘But he knows the rough area we’re in. He left me the chalk mark on the oak tree to meet him.’

‘True,’ Hannah said. ‘And that’s only about two miles from here. It wouldn’t take those bastards long to track us down. There are few houses in this area—it’s mainly agricultural land.’

‘Is there any way we can find out if Francois is still alive?’ Lizzie asked, her voice ringing with sadness.

‘The only chance is if I overhear something at work tomorrow. Lots of soldiers from all over Paris come in and out. That’s why it’s such a brilliant position to be in.’

Lizzie stared at Hannah and realised she was deadly serious. She was going to waltz into German High Command tomorrow morning as though nothing had happened, even though one of her lead Resistance members, at this very second, could spill his guts to the Gestapo about her: Angel, the Liberty Network leader.

‘What else do you suggest?’ Hannah asked, seeing the shock on Lizzie’s face, and raising an eyebrow.

‘Jack says you should come back to London with me tomorrow night.’

When Hannah didn’t refuse, Lizzie pressed on, hoping she was seriously considering her suggestion. ‘Imagine how wonderful it would be if Jack could get a message to Henry and you two could see each other again. It must be more than a year, isn’t it?’

Hannah turned her head, and Lizzie felt the force of her blue eyes studying her. ‘It’s been one year, five months—.’ Her voice tailed off as she moved her fingers. ‘And six days.’

Lizzie stared at Hannah, thinking how awful it would be not to see Jack for so long. Not to know if she would ever see him again. It was too terrible to imagine.

On impulse, she beseeched her, ‘Come back with me, Hannah. Do this for you and Henry. You need to see each other, even if it’s just for a day, or even a few hours! You can return and resume your work when things have cooled down.’

Hannah’s eyes glowed with raw emotion. ‘As lovely as that sounds, I can’t. There’s too much at stake.’

‘You are allowed to have a life, you know. All of this is important. I understand what we’re fighting for—the freedoms you are fighting for—but still ...’ Lizzie rubbed her forehead with one hand as a pain gripped her head.

‘I know it must look that way. But I’m not like you and Jack. I have no home to go back to.’

Lizzie’s throat clogged, and the tears seeped from her eyes. She couldn’t hold back the pent-up emotion any longer. It was all too sad to bear, and the feelings swept through her like a giant wave.

‘But Henry is your home,’ she whispered. ‘And me and Jack. We all care for you so much. Jack said you can come home with me. You’ve more than earned a place at the SOE. You’d be invaluable to them as a full-time agent behind the scenes.’

Hannah said, ‘It is very thoughtful of you. And Jack. But I’m not a behind-the-scenes kind of girl. I need to be in the centre of the action. I’d go insane in some office in

London instead of here in the thick of it. As long as the Nazis are terrorising France, I will be here, fighting them every step of the way.'

Lizzie reached for Hannah's hand and squeezed it. 'I understand. I just wish it were different.'

'Me too. After the war—if I make it through—I dream of visiting my cousins in Jerusalem. If the British are still ruling there, perhaps Jack will help me arrange it,' Hannah said, her tone wistful. 'In the thirties, when things got really frightening for us in Berlin, my cousins wrote to invite us to join them. How I wish my parents had left Germany and boarded a ship to Haifa whilst they still could.'

Hannah continued talking as if in a trance. 'Every Passover, we prayed for "Next year in Jerusalem". Jews have always lived in the Land of Israel, but I used to think reestablishing our own independent state in the historic homeland was just a Zionist dream. With the rise of the Reich, I see it as our only hope of having the right to defend ourselves in our own land. This time it's Hitler, next time, it will be someone else.'

Lizzie listened as Hannah, who was visibly emotional, talked of her family.

'My father told me stories of how our ancestors returned to Israel after each time a tyrant expelled them. When the Romans occupied Judea, they did everything in their power to crush the population. After yet another rebellion, Roman Emperor Hadrian, renamed Judea, Syria Palaestina, to punish the Jews and try to erase the link to their land.'

Hannah spoke softly, sharing snippets of the history of the Jewish people.

Lizzie couldn't imagine what it must be like to come from a nation that was persecuted over thousands of years just because of their ethnic identity, but she knew

what it was like to have her homeland occupied. It was likely the Nazis had entrenched themselves at Seagrove. She clung to the hope that it wasn't so, and her grandparents still lived in their beautiful house overlooking Portelet Bay in Jersey. Lizzie cherished the memory of her family home exactly as it was when she left.

'Do you think the Jews will be able to live in peace in their homeland when this is all over?' Lizzie asked.

'Not unless we fight for our lives and destroy the Nazis. There won't be a Jew alive if they repeat what they did in Germany and Poland. Nor a person with a physical disability, mental illness, a homosexual or any other group the Nazis regard as inferior to their bloody "master race". They have a special word for non-Aryans, you know: Untermenschen. They class us as subhuman and believe our genes must be eliminated from the gene pool.'

The tears rolled down Lizzie's face and she surrendered to the emotion. Her heart felt like it was bursting, and she found it cathartic to release the pain.

The two young women sat together in mutual understanding, Lizzie sniffing, her face pink and damp. She didn't know how long passed until Hannah stood. When she returned, she placed two cups of coffee on the table in front of them.

'You must leave soon. I'll take you as far as I can without risking leading the Boche to our contact's door.'

CHAPTER 28

Hannah turned into Avenue Kléber on the way to work, lost in thought, as she pushed hard on the pedals of the old bicycle. Lizzie had looked at her like she was out of her mind when she said she was going in as usual that morning. Lizzie wasn't wrong. She probably was out of her mind, but this was the only way she knew to fight the evil that had wrapped its vicious tentacles around every breathing sinew of her life.

They'd made up their beds in the basement last night, and neither of them slept much. Hannah was constantly on alert for a bang on the door and the Gestapo sweeping through the house, hunting for them. There was a reasonable chance they wouldn't find them in the camouflaged basement she had spent weeks concealing when she first moved into the deserted farmhouse.

When Hannah finally drifted off into a deep sleep in the early hours, she woke with a start when she realised she would be late for work if she didn't leave soon.

'You're not really going into work,' Lizzie said, her sleepy eyes showing her incredulity .

'I intend to do just that,' she said, clutching her cardigan around her in an attempt to keep out the gnawing damp of the basement. 'If the Germans don't get us first, we're going to die of pneumonia sleeping down here. Thank goodness we got the Sterns out.'

'Yes, it's no luxury hotel, that's for sure,' Lizzie said, yawning and rubbing her chilly

arms.

Hannah had a lot of respect for Lizzie. Despite Jack ordering her to abandon the farmhouse and find somewhere else to stay for the night, she had elected to stay.

Lizzie had argued, 'I don't see the point of leaving when we can hide in the basement. If they're onto us, we're just as likely to be spotted if we make a run for it now, don't you think? It's so late, we'll stand out like sore thumbs in the city at this hour.'

'You have a point. There's no feasible route through the forest. We'd have to take our chances and avoid checkpoints and sentries as best we can.'

'I vote I stay here for the night. That way, I'm not endangering you in some risky dash across Paris at night.'

Hannah had thought for a few minutes and then said, 'Well, it's your call. If you want to go, I'm happy to show you the way. If you want to stay here, sleeping in the basement is a good plan, so I'll do that even if you leave. There's no point making it easy for them to catch me, is there?'

Lizzie replied, 'No, I'm staying with you. Going now makes no sense at all.'

Lizzie's concern for her touched Hannah. 'I hope the SOE knows how dedicated you are.'

'They might not agree with you when Jack learns I didn't follow his orders.'

'True, although he doesn't have to! You don't have to tell him everything, you know.'

Now, as Hannah approached German High Command, she inhaled the fresh chilled air before turning off the road and weaving around to the back of the building where she parked her bicycle. Nobody had bothered them in the night, so Francois clearly hadn't told them about her. Yet.

Poor dear Francois. She suspected he wouldn't break even if they tortured him. He'd suffered too much already at the hands of those brutes. If she had to put money on it, she'd bet he wouldn't crack. The thought of him being tortured by the Gestapo made her shudder more than the harsh January winds.

Hannah straightened her beret, which was askew from her mad dash across the countryside and into the city. Her heart pounded as she reached the threshold of the building.

This was truth time.

'Guten Morgen,' Hannah said, her tone friendly as an ordinary French woman arriving at work with nothing to hide, not the Berlin born Jewish leader of the Liberty Network which only two nights previously had failed in its mission to blow up a train transporting German troops and weapons.

When she entered the outer office, the cleaner, Celine, was just finishing her morning rounds. 'He's in early today,' she mouthed, pointing to the closed door. 'Something must be up. He's not usually in this early,' she whispered.

Hannah hadn't risked probing the cleaner on her allegiances, but she didn't seem like a Nazi sympathiser. She always had a kind word for Hannah, who thought she could even be a friend of the Resistance. It was impossible to recognise friend or foe because the network functioned in such a way that each member developed sympathetic contacts, but they were often known only to the member themselves.

‘Thank you for warning me. I’ll make his coffee. Would you like one?’ Hannah said, her voice low to match the friendly cleaner’s .

‘No, I’d better not. I’m covering for a friend today who was too sick to come in for her shift, poor love.’

The cleaner bustled about completing her duties, then said a harried goodbye to Hannah.

‘Have a good day, Celine,’ she called after her as she hurried out of the room.

Hannah steeled herself for whatever awaited her with the major general. She guessed she wouldn’t have made it past the lobby if he was onto her. His moods were unpredictable, and during recent weeks, he had grown steadily bolder in his flirtatious advances. She pretended she didn’t know what he was doing and so far, she’d fended him off with a mixture of innocence and ignorance. He’d even touched her leg last week when her skirt writhed up as she stretched for a file. She’d almost gagged with disgust and had to rein herself in not to slap him across the face. Another time, she would have wrestled him to the ground and broken his neck with one sharp snap. SOE agents weren’t the only ones who knew how to kill with their bare hands.

Hannah knocked on the major general’s door and he called for her to enter. She wished him good morning and placed his coffee in front of him like she did every day. He was not alone, which was odd at this hour. An officer of a similar age to Hans turned to greet her. ‘Good morning.’

‘Bring him a coffee too,’ Hans said, pointing to the man.

‘Thank you,’ said the visitor with an engaging smile and kind eyes.

They aren’t all bad, Hannah thought.

But they are doing bad things . When her resolve weakened, she reminded herself of this irrefutable fact. The Reich was not a force for good in any way, shape, or form. It was like a rotten apple, polluted to its core.

When she returned with the second coffee and placed it on the large desk, the two men were deep in conversation, and she realised they were discussing their parents. The visitor must be the major general's brother, and they talked about their father's health. Hannah noticed her boss wasn't overly friendly to his brother. She tucked the information away in her mind in case it came in useful in the future.

Lizzie took a different route from Hannah when they reached the city, and they went their separate ways.

The last thing Hannah said to her before they left the farmhouse that morning was, 'If I'm not at our meeting point by 7 p.m. it could mean he's onto me. Then again, it could just be he makes me stay late. The pervert loves it when there's no one else around.'

Lizzie's stomach churned at the thought of what she had done. She didn't want to lie to Jack, but she had been sure that making a run for it last night wasn't the best course of action.

Lizzie hoped Hannah was right and if she made it out tonight, the topic of where she had slept would not come up when she was back in London. Jack always advised her to follow her gut, she reasoned, as she jumped off the bicycle and blended effortlessly into the busy throngs of Parisians. Parisians and Germans. There were soldiers everywhere in the city. Some were on duty, guarding the buildings that the Reich had commandeered, whilst others milled about the streets, shops, and restaurants as though they were enjoying a carefree holiday. Lizzie guessed some were on leave, but the sight of them acting as if they owned Paris infuriated her.

Lizzie mulled over what else she could do to pass the time apart from queue for food until she met Hannah later. It looked as though Francois hadn't revealed their whereabouts. Lizzie guessed he must either be dead, or he was as stubborn as Hannah predicted. Just as she took her place in line at the boucherie , a menacing voice said over her shoulder, 'Come with me, mademoiselle.'

Lizzie spun around and found herself face to face with a short, stocky German soldier with beady brown eyes and a machine gun slung over his shoulder. He signalled for her to exit and follow him.

She straightened her shoulders and stared at him. 'Madame,' she corrected him, her voice authoritative even as fear rushed through her.

'Madame,' he said, his voice tinged with sarcasm. Once she left the queue, he pushed her in the small of the back and she stumbled.

'What do you want with me?' she asked, her voice steady as she regained her footing.

The soldier steered her over to a group of soldiers, and she saw a cluster of civilians waiting nearby, looking scared.

'Show me your papers,' he commanded.

Lizzie knew there was no way out, so she scrambled through her bag and retrieved her forged identity papers.

The soldier snatched them and read aloud, his tone mocking. 'Jacqueline Simon. What a pretty name for a pretty woman.'

'I don't understand what you want,' Lizzie blustered, her heart pounding so fast it felt like the ground spun around her.

‘The question is, what is Jacqueline Simon doing in Paris?’

‘I’m visiting my sister,’ she said.

The soldier grabbed her arm. ‘You’re coming with me,’ he said, pushing her into the back of a big van.

CHAPTER 29

The loud clang of the door resounded around the small cell. People were crammed in, leaning against the walls, fear etched on their faces in the dim light. Lizzie scanned the group, trying to understand what her connection was to the others. She didn't see where they'd taken her in the van, but they hadn't driven for long, so it can't have been far. They'd hustled them into a tall building, and then shuffled them down some stone steps into this cell.

Francois must have broken under interrogation and now they were rounding up the Resistance members one by one. It was one explanation for the way she'd been hauled away so suddenly. Lizzie's mind was jumbled with thoughts of Francois, Hannah, Phillipe, and the rest of the network. None of the people she recognised were here, so she held onto a slither of hope that they didn't have the others. Yet.

Hannah could have been arrested at German High Command as she had feared. Perhaps they had been watching them since the failed mission and only lulled them into a false sense of security by not searching the farmhouse.

If it were an SOE operation, the agent would follow the suspect and see where they led them. The Wehrmacht wouldn't be trained in espionage, but the Gestapo would know how to draw out agents, so perhaps that's what this was. But she had only seen soldiers so far, and it didn't seem like a Gestapo arrest.

Lizzie checked her watch. It was still only mid-morning. She had the whole day to get out of there and make it to the pickup tonight. Some people were talking to each other in low voices, and Lizzie leaned closer to listen. The conversation seemed

innocuous enough, and after about ten minutes of concentrated listening, she had heard nothing to make her any the wiser why they had all been detained.

‘Do you know why they brought you in?’ Lizzie asked a middle-aged smartly dressed woman who sat on a bench in the cell's corner.

‘No, I do not know. I was on the way to visit my daughter-in-law and grandchild, and they swooped in and shoved me into their truck.’

Lizzie asked some more of the detainees as discreetly as she could about what they had been doing when they were stopped. None of them sounded like they were up to anything suspicious. But then, if they asked Lizzie what she had been doing, she wouldn't seem suspicious either. If they were agents or spies, it was their job to blend in, just like it was hers.

Studying the group surreptitiously, she couldn't figure out what was going on. If these people were enemies of the Nazi state, they were a ramshackle lot. Some clutched onto their shopping bags, guarding their precious rations, whilst others looked terrified and barely moved.

Time trickled like treacle, and a wave of exhaustion hit Lizzie, and she slumped down to sit on the cold ground. No one showed any signs of being dangerous, and many of the detainees had dozed off on the floor or on the benches. She couldn't risk falling asleep in case someone went for her papers or money, but she would rest a little. No one had come in to question them yet, and she knew no more now than when they arrived. Lizzie fought sleep, struggling to keep her eyes open. She played mental games to stay awake, like Jack had taught her.

‘There will be times when your body is beyond exhaustion and your spirit is so weary, you are desperate for sleep, but you must learn to stay awake to defend yourself.’

Lizzie ran through their wireless codes to keep her mind alert, but it was a battle to stop her eyelids from drooping. How she longed to burrow into her soft mattress in her bedroom in the Regent's Park house. Her mother beckoned her to join the family for tea in the drawing room, and Lizzie tasted delicious crunchy toast, and her mouth watered. Her head jerked up, and she realised she had nodded off despite her best efforts. It had been a long night with little sleep. Lizzie stood and walked around the cell, avoiding sleeping bodies strewn about.

After a while, a gruff male voice called out, 'You, mademoiselle. Sit down and stop making us all dizzy.'

Lizzie looked at the old man and apologised. 'I am trying to stay awake in case they release us soon.'

The man snorted. 'You are optimistic. So, you think these Nazi pigs are going to take pity on us and just let us go like that, do you?'

Lizzie approached the man, hoping to learn more about why they were here. 'Why did they detain you?' she asked.

'No idea,' he said. 'The bastards don't need an excuse. They run France now, God help us. Makes me wonder what we fought for in the last war.'

Lizzie thought of her mother again, and a wave of homesickness gripped her until she felt like crying. Was this how she was going to end up? Rotting in a Nazi jail, or worse? Her hand moved to her neck and her fingers touched the pendant Jack had given her. If all else failed, she would use the cyanide pill.

Hours passed, and eventually the door opened, and a soldier entered carrying a bucket. He threw some bread rolls at the prisoners, who did their best to catch them, but most rolled across the dusty floor as people scrambled to get them. Lizzie's

stomach rumbled, and she reached to claim a roll too, but they had all gone. She looked at the soldier. 'We need more,' she said. 'There aren't enough to go round.'

He spat on the floor and threw a few more up in the air. Some of the detainees were old and frail, and Lizzie didn't want to take one before they got theirs. The soldier delighted in his power to eke them out, and he taunted her by throwing more onto the floor. Lizzie reached for one and rubbed it on her coat to dust off the dirt. 'When do we get out of here?' she asked him, thinking she had nothing to lose. 'You have no reason to hold us. We are French citizens going about our business. We've done nothing wrong.'

Lizzie heard a woman gasp nearby.

'There'll be someone down to question you shortly,' growled the soldier, who turned and left the room.

'I would kill for some water,' Lizzie heard someone say over the other side of the room.

Several more hours passed, and it was late afternoon by the time two soldiers entered and questioned them. The questions seemed routine, and Lizzie was even more puzzled about why they had been hauled into the truck and locked up in this cell.

By the time they turned to Lizzie, she knew what to expect.

'What are you doing in Paris?'

Lizzie repeated her cover story, and one soldier yawned and rubbed his eyes. She saw this as a minor victory and decided she would up the yawn factor and bore them to tears.

‘What does your sister do?’ the other one continued.

‘She is recuperating, which is why I am staying with her.’

Another yawn.

Lizzie didn’t mention that her cover story sister worked at German High Command. If Hannah was being interrogated because of Francois, she wouldn’t crack easily, and Lizzie figured even if they were subjecting her to unspeakable horrors, it would take a while before she spilled any details, if she did at all.

Lizzie breathed in and out steadily. The chances were, they knew nothing. Their questions were still mundane, and she guessed they had no clue who she was.

Follow your gut, Lizzie. Jack’s voice rang loudly in her head.

Her gut said they knew nothing, so she continued to be slightly insolent and very dull with her answers. They asked her a few more questions, and then the yawning one shrugged and barked something at the other. They moved to the next target, and Lizzie released a ragged sigh. The interrogation, if you could call it that, appeared to be over.

More time passed slowly, and the prisoners waited. A few fell asleep and even snored, whilst others cowered against the wall, obviously frightened of what their fate had in store for them.

Lizzie’s mouth was dry, her head banged, and she was parched. They’d given them nothing to drink since their arrival that morning. She felt lightheaded and was panicking. It didn’t look like they were going to release them anytime soon, which meant she would miss the pickup Jack had arranged for that night. She would also miss the scheduled meeting with Hannah. That was if her cover wasn’t blown, and

Hannah showed up.

‘Merde,’ Lizzie muttered .

Everything had gone wrong since they shot poor Francois. She hadn’t been in contact with Philippe because it was too dangerous, but she took comfort that he wasn’t locked in this room with her. There was still a chance the others hadn’t been arrested, and she was the only one in custody.

When her watch crawled to 6 p.m. it was getting too late to make the meeting. Lizzie needed Hannah to show her to the pickup spot.

What would Hannah do when Lizzie didn’t turn up?

Lizzie mulled this over but didn’t come up with much. She thought Hannah would search for her in the area, and then go home and wait there. What else could she do? Just as Lizzie resigned herself to the thought that she was in there for the night, the heavy door clicked open again and light from the hallway streamed in.

The soldiers entered again and grabbed two detainees, who struggled a bit as they dragged them out of the cell. Lizzie’s heart rammed against her chest as she stood there in the shadows, wondering what they would do with her.

‘You can go,’ barked one soldier, casting his eyes around the exhausted-looking group.

Some of them quickly scrambled to their feet, but most of them stared at the soldiers, their eyes glazed, not quite believing they were free to go. Lizzie could see some of them were scared this was a trap, and they were about to fall right into it if they stood to leave.

Lizzie's senses screamed at her to get out of there whilst she could, so she walked towards the soldiers. 'Thank you, gentleman. My sister will be worried, and I need to find her. Which is the quickest way out?'

It was as though she opened the floodgates, and the others streamed after her, nudging and pushing to get out of the miserable dark cell.

The soldiers led the way and soon the raggle-taggle group spilled out onto the pavement, hardly believing their luck. Lizzie wondered what they would do to the two they had removed from the cell. Then she moved away, walking fast, before the soldiers changed their minds. She could still make the meeting with Hannah if she ran and went back for her bicycle afterwards.

Once out of sight of the soldiers, Lizzie broke into a run and moved as fast as she could, until she reached the spot near the Seine, where they were supposed to meet around 6.30 p.m. She flopped down, gasping on the nearby bench, desperate for water, but that would have to wait. She had made it just in the nick of time. Minutes ticked by, which turned into an hour, but there was still no sign of Hannah. As she waited, her jubilant elation at being free again withered like a deflating balloon.

Had the worst happened, and the Gestapo had Hannah?

CHAPTER 30

Curfew hadn't set in yet, but it was dark and freezing as Lizzie cycled back to the farmhouse after retrieving her bicycle. The only light was from the moon and fortunately she had memorised the turnings to take after so many journeys during the past few weeks. She was about to take a turn into a country lane, when her tyres skidded; she lost control and the next thing she knew she was cartwheeling through the air before landing on the icy ground like a discarded doll.

'Ouch!' The word escaped Lizzie's throat before she could stop it. Fearfully, she scanned the area to check no one had overheard her crying out in English. One instinctive sound like that would identify her as a British agent, and she cursed herself—inwardly, this time—for such an amateur blunder.

Fortunately, there wasn't a soul in sight.

Lizzie pulled herself up, her weary, aching body complaining with every move. She could not afford any injuries now. Gingerly, she moved her limbs. Nothing seemed broken, and she stooped to pick up the battered bicycle and eased herself back onto the seat .

It had been one hell of a day. She must be due some good luck soon, she thought, as she cycled. A sober voice reminded her she'd been incredibly lucky to be released from the German cell. They could easily have kept them locked up indefinitely, even if they were innocent of any crime. That was the terrifying thing in a dictatorship—there were no rules or checks.

Lizzie corrected herself: the Germans were incredibly methodical, so there would be rules and checks, just not the kind of rules and checks that would help a French citizen. Lizzie realised she was shaking as she pedalled along the dark country lane, partly from the cold seeping into her joints and partly from the shock of falling off the bicycle.

As she neared the farmhouse, she was disappointed to see it was in total darkness. There was no dim light shining through the blackout blinds. That meant one of two things—either Hannah hadn't made it home, or she was home and pretending not to be. It was only a few days since the disastrous sabotage operation. With every day that passed, the less likely it was that Francois had spilt what he knew about the Liberty Network to the interrogators, but they were still in danger.

Francois' friendly face loomed in her mind again. She thought of how he had offered her a cigarette to help pass the time when they waited on the bank for the train during her first sabotage operation. He was a good man, and she prayed he wasn't dead, even though it would be safer for the network if he was. Hannah said there was a chance he had swallowed his cyanide pill in time.

Lizzie circled the farmhouse from afar several times, taking different routes, looking for evidence the house was under surveillance. There was no sign of German military or any vehicles at all. The place was rural, and it was unusual to bump into anyone after dark. Farmers retired to their homes before nightfall and lived to the rhythm of the sun rising and setting. Days were short, and winter was a time for maintenance and renewal, ready to plant and reap their rewards in warmer months. The Nazis kept the farmers dancing to their tune, supplying them with whatever they commanded. They didn't have it easy, even though they were out of the spotlight of the city.

After circling the area and seeing nothing that alerted her to danger, Lizzie entered the back garden. There was a faint hint of dusky sky, and the moon cast its magical glow so she could make out the shape of the door. Soon, the darkness would thicken

and wrap itself around the old building, which had many secrets to tell.

Lizzie thought of her welcoming house in London and how there was always someone at home to greet her after a long day. Pangs of loss clutched at her, sinking her spirits even lower. How had she ended up here? Alone in occupied Paris in a spooky farmhouse, frightened she was being watched by the evil eye of the Gestapo. If they were onto her, she would no doubt soon find herself a prisoner on the infamous Avenue Foch.

Lizzie's mind swirled as she unlocked the back door, her heart chiming like a death knell. She scolded herself to get a hold of her emotions, or she wouldn't last five minutes alone.

'Collette?' Lizzie called out, her voice low as she entered the hallway and walked into the cold, dark kitchen. If this was a trap, she was ready. Collette Simon was her sister, not Hannah Stein.

No response. She fumbled about on the counter and lit the small lamp, followed by the candles nearby. The kitchen didn't look as forbidding with the glow of the soft light flickering and reflecting on the walls. Lizzie shrugged off her overcoat and lay her beret on the table.

'Collette, are you home?' she called again tentatively as she walked through the ground floor rooms, holding a candlestick, her senses racing as her mind painted hair-raising scenarios of Germans laying wait in the shadows.

She climbed the stairs, her heart thudding so loudly in her ears, she felt faint from the sheer terror. What was it about the dark that was so unnerving? The weight of her foot caused one stair to creak, and she almost dropped the candlestick. Moving slowly through each room, there was no sign of Hannah.

‘Collette, where are you?’ she called, keeping up the cover pretence in case this was some kind of elaborate ruse to lull her into revealing Hannah’s true identity.

Lizzie was impatient with the fearful feelings controlling her. She was being ridiculous. Clearly, no one was here. She went back downstairs, heated some watery broth and devoured it hungrily, her heart still thudding.

Hannah was missing.

Hannah could kick herself for not guessing what Hans was up to. He had ordered her in his usual gruff manner to follow him into his suite of private rooms, saying there were papers to show her, and it would be easier to work in there. No sooner had she entered his lair, he snapped the lock on the door and turned on her, snarling.

Now, she sat writhing on a hard chair, her hands tied behind her back with a thick cord cutting into her wrists. She was angry at him, but even angrier at herself for not spotting something had changed. Hannah chided herself that her hubris knew no bounds. She had a way of thinking she could get out of any situation, no matter how difficult, and this time, her confidence hadn’t served her well. She should have been more alert, but when the guards at German High Command greeted her in the morning as usual, and the major general treated her just as he always did, she dismissed her concerns. She concluded Francois had either died from the gunshot wounds, or he had swallowed his suicide pill. Either way, she assumed she was safe to continue with the operation. This undercover work was the most important of her life, and she wouldn’t abandon it unless she was blown.

Hannah’s eyes scanned the unfamiliar room, and what she saw sickened her. Nazi memorabilia lined the shelves and every surface, and photos of prominent Nazis mocked her from the walls. Hitler’s vile face stared back at her from a photograph of the Führer with a group of serious-looking young men. She immediately recognised them as Hitler Youth. When she was a child in Berlin, she and her friends lived in

constant fear of the Hitler Youth bullies, who used any opportunity to taunt Jews who were forbidden to be members. Being excluded left the Jewish youth lost in a precarious wasteland, when in the early days, they hadn't realised the group was formed to be their nemesis.

In the photo, a young Hans stood straight as a ramrod in his beige jacket with the swastika patch on one arm. His arrogant expression hadn't changed. In another photo, he was receiving some kind of Hitler Youth award. Hitlerjugend was engraved on the silver frame. The German name stirred up traumatic memories for Hannah.

In the early days, it was fashionable to be a member, and Hannah had hated that she was forbidden from joining the League of German Girls, the female Hitler Youth group. She had wanted nothing more than to fit in and belong, and she couldn't understand why she wasn't classed as a German girl. If she wasn't a German even though she was born in Berlin and spoke native German, then what was she?

One day, when she was on the way home from buying a newspaper for her father, a crowd of older girls surrounded her and pushed her against a wall. Even now, Hannah could feel the terror shoot through her body at the memory. One of them had pulled her blonde plaits until her eyes watered, one had twisted her fingers back until she screamed in pain, and another had slapped her repeatedly around the face.

'Juden, Juden, Juden, ' they chanted, encircling her so she couldn't escape their taunts and sneers. 'You have no place in Germany,' they shouted. 'It's all your fault we lost the war.'

Eventually they grew tired of bullying her and she stumbled home, her cheeks scratched and bleeding, her little finger broken, and her school shirt ripped across her adolescent chest.

Her mother had taken her in her arms and held her tightly, stroking her hair to soothe

her, whilst Hannah sobbed loud racking sounds that broke her mother's heart. She had been cleaned up in the bathroom and her father took her to the family doctor who expertly bound her fingers, tutting as her father explained what had happened.

‘God knows what is coming if this is how they treat our children.’

Hannah was hurting and in shock as she chewed a biscuit, the kind doctor's wife gave her, whilst her father and the doctor fell into a deep conversation about how terrible the persecution of the Jews in Germany had become. Hannah still remembered the doctor's words because they had shocked her to the core. Perhaps that was when it hit her that things would not work out—there would not be a happy ending like in a fairy tale when the villain is brought to justice. German Jews were caught in a living hell, and it was only going to get worse.

Dr Goldberg said, ‘I have secured places on a ship leaving for Eretz Israel . You could come too. Have you considered it? The Jewish Agency is buying land from whoever will sell it. Much of the uninhabited areas are swamps, but they are draining them for agriculture.’

Hannah's father said, ‘The Land of Israel. The Promised Land. What a wonderful dream.’

Dr Goldberg finished tending to Hannah's injuries and turned to face her father, a disbelieving expression on his face. ‘Surely you see there is no future for Jews in Hitler's Germany? Get out whilst you still can, Daniel.’

‘ Abba , what did Dr Goldberg mean about going on a ship?’

Later that day, her father took her into his study and pointed to a tiny area on a large map on the wall. ‘Hannah, this is the Land of Israel where your cousins live. It's the Jews' historic homeland. Dr Goldberg and his family are leaving Berlin and

travelling to Eretz Israel.'

Hannah's father continued, 'The first Jewish Temple was built in Jerusalem, the capital of the Kingdom of Judah around 1000 BCE by King Solomon, the son of King David.'

Hannah hadn't paid much attention to Bible study, but suddenly the information was no longer just a dull history lesson.

'Can we travel on the ship to Eretz Israel and meet our cousins?' Hannah asked, her sweet voice piped with hope even as her bruised eye stung and her finger throbbed. The reminder that her family had a place to call home buoyed her spirits. There was a magical place on the map where Jews belonged, and they could go there like Dr Goldberg.

Her father mussed his daughter's hair, his eyes shining. 'Maybe one day, my love,' was all he said.

Hannah stared at the photo of the young, proud Hans, and wondered, not for the first time, what had made those German children despise her.

Hans had disappeared through an interior door, and Hannah wriggled her wrists to loosen the cord, but he had tied it hard and tight. Her feet were also bound, and her mouth was covered in tape, which hampered her breathing.

The thought entered her mind like an ominous shadow. Did he intend to kill her?

CHAPTER 31

The spike of adrenaline flooding Lizzie's senses as she combed the large old farmhouse by candlelight, searching for signs of Hannah, exhausted her and she sank heavily onto the kitchen sofa.

What now? The house was deserted. Lizzie calculated if they were onto them, they would have been there already. Plenty of time had passed for poor Francois to spill everything he knew. Before they left that morning, they had placed a piece of black cotton on the top of the door that led to the basement. It hadn't broken, so Lizzie was safe for now, but if they had arrested Hannah today, it was only a matter of time before they searched her home looking for evidence. Wasn't it?

Lizzie dragged her bruised body off the sofa and went upstairs to set up the wireless. It was time to message Jack. He wouldn't like what she was going to tell him, but she must tell him all the same.

Sitting at the old table in the attic, Lizzie worked out what she would say, and then used *The Count of Monte Cristo* to code her message .

Whilst she worked, she waited for the signal from Jack to go ahead. Minutes passed with no response. She worried she would have to wait for the next scheduled time. It would be too late by then.

Her message read:

Raven. Detained today. I am safe. Angel is missing. Can't leave tonight. Must find

Angel to get there. Seagrove.

Lizzie sat in the gloom, feeling more alone than she had ever felt. She waited for his signal, and on impulse she added, 'Missing London.'

It was the closest she could get to telling him she loved and missed him, but she knew he would understand.

Finally, the signal came, and her message transmitted over the airwaves. Lizzie waited for a response. Hopefully Jack would decode the message quickly. She wanted his reply now. Partly because she needed his blessing for the change of plan, and partly because it made her feel close to him. It wasn't much, but it was something.

His response came back quicker than she anticipated, and she rushed to decode his reply:

Seagrove. You must go to pickup. Coordinates on way. Do not stay. Too dangerous. Repeat, do not stay. London misses Seagrove. Raven.

Lizzie knew he wanted to write Raven misses Seagrove, but this was the sensible option and his sign off touched her sore heart. Now she must await his next message with the coordinates of the pickup and abandon Hannah against her better judgement. She moved to the attic window in the eaves. There was no blackout covering because they never lit more than a small candle or torch when they radioed. A torrent of melancholy filled Lizzie's soul as she gazed out the window over the dark countryside. She longed to feel Jack's arms around her and for the comfort of his presence. It wasn't something particular he did. It was just the way it was between them. When they were together, everything felt joyful, and even during the gloomiest days of the Blitz, she believed things would turn out alright.

Lizzie had stopped trying to understand why he had such a soothing effect on her. In

the early days when they grew close, she had searched for answers about why she felt so at home when she was with him. It wasn't a feeling she was used to, and no man had ever affected her in that way.

Now she accepted their connection as an unwavering reality. It was a gift, and she was grateful for it every single day. They were meant to be together, and there was no point trying to understand why.

The moon was almost full and cast a silvery light on the tall, barren trees in front of the house. How could such divine perfection exist in the midst of darkness? The moonlight illuminated the ink-black sky with its glittery silver dance. It was magical, and she stared at it, mesmerised by its mystical beauty.

Suddenly, she heard a loud noise that set her nerves alight. The eerie sound rose in pitch, and it was deep and musical and haunting. Her heart raced as her eyes followed the noise to the cluster of trees swaying in the fierce night wind. A lone black bird balanced on a branch of a tree; his thick chest feathers glinting in the metallic light.

Raven was watching over her, just as he had promised.

The fear instantly drained from her body, and she was elevated and emboldened. Lizzie knew she could do this. She knew she could stay, and she would stay. With Raven watching over her, she could do anything.

The message with the coordinates for the pickup came in, and she set it aside and scratched out her reply to Jack. She sent it in a flurry of activity:

Raven. When did Angel become expendable? Seagrove.

Silence followed. No message arrived and another ten minutes passed as Lizzie checked her watch by candlelight and searched for another glimpse of the raven. The

black bird wasn't there any longer, and she wondered if she'd imagined the whole thing. Was she missing Jack so much, her mind was playing fanciful tricks on her?

No. She had seen the raven, and she clutched onto the confidence of the bird's call. Lizzie sat there waiting, growing colder in the attic as the night frosts descended and the temperature dropped even lower.

After what seemed like an age, another message arrived:

Seagrove. You are right. Find her. Be careful. Raven.

Hans appeared in front of Hannah again, staring down at her with angry eyes.

'You think I'm such a fool, you could double cross me like that? You come into my office and steal the Reich's secrets from under my nose?' Hans waved his hand in the air and Hannah closed her eyes as she guessed what was coming .

The sound of the sharp slap rang out around the room, and she opened her eyes as the sting lashed at the delicate skin of her right cheek. Her azure eyes glowed with defiance despite the pain. It was too late to pretend there had been a misunderstanding. He clearly knew she was in the Resistance and had been passing on intelligence, so there was no point denying it.

The Nazi officer bedecked in all his finery, stepped back and then lashed out again as his hand hit her other cheek with the full force of his muscular arm. Hannah moved her head slightly, as if to banish the pain. It was more a punch than a slap, and her skin transformed from pink to purple.

'Not so courageous now, are you, you French traitor?' Hans spat the words, and his spittle landed near her eye.

Hannah couldn't speak with the tape over her mouth, so she just glared at him. He stood for everything she loathed, and everything that had ruined her life and that of her beloved family. It was probably for the best, she thought. If she could speak, she would only anger him further, taunting him about hitting a girl like the coward he obviously was.

Thoughts flashed through her mind, and she tried to figure out what to do. How could she escape this literal bind? Hannah knew there was a way because her years in the field had taught her there was always a way. You just couldn't always see it.

Hannah steeled herself for another bashing as her captor brought his large hand into contact with her cheek once more. This time his ring with the Nazi eagle symbol caught her skin, and she felt it split and the blood gush to the surface and seep down her face.

What do you know for certain, Hannah? she asked herself from within her fog of pain. What do you know?

The worlds tumbled around her mind as she grasped for clarity. This was her chance to work out what to do. It may be her only chance. The torment was only going to get worse based on the expression of relish on his face. Hans was enjoying every second of hurting her, and she guessed he would not stop unless he had to. She could barely move, so she couldn't fend him off physically. Words were all she had. Hannah cursed herself once more for her negligence. She was better than this and blamed herself for allowing him to tie her up. He was far bigger and stronger than her, but she had the skills to bring him to his knees. If only she'd not followed him into his den like a little lamb to the slaughter.

The thought of succumbing to his cruelty made her angrier and renewed her strength. Anger was her friend. Hannah had learnt to draw on her emotions in a way that fuelled her missions. If her work required her to kill a German, all she had to do was

picture her mother and father being herded into a Nazi truck outside their home in Berlin. That gave her the strength to do what she must when her resolve weakened, and she doubted her choices.

But who would choose a life like this?

No one. She always gave the same answer to her own question. No one chose a life like this. No sane person chose a life in the Resistance, but sometimes life put you in an impossible position where all you had were two choices: Fight back or surrender and die.

Since that day when the Hitler Youth girls smacked her about, she had promised herself never again to be a victim. They could do what they liked to her body, but they would not break her spirit. They did not have the power to break her spirit, and that kept her going through the awful years when she was alone on the run, working undercover, with nothing to her name but her desire to destroy the Nazi terror machine. That's why no matter how many times Hans slapped or punched her with his big hard hands, he wouldn't win .

There was something she longed for. It wasn't noble, like fighting for freedom and justice, but it was locked inside her soul like a festering wound, and one day she would release it into the light.

Revenge.

Hannah would exact revenge on those bastards who had destroyed her life and taken her family. And revenge would be sweet, of that she was certain, no matter how much her face throbbed as the blood dripped into her mouth and down her chin.

'Tell me who you work for,' snarled Hans, snapping her back to the moment.

Hannah raised her head and looked at him with insolent, blazing eyes. Then she shook her head slowly from side to side. The pain in her head was like a boomerang, but she shook it again for good measure.

‘You silly little girl. You think you can look down your superior French nose at me and resist my advances like I’m dirt on your shoe? Do you really think I didn’t suspect you?’ Hans spat on the ground near her feet. ‘Wearing these unattractive clothes to put me off. Thought that would work on me, did you? Well, I have news for you. I’m not an idiot. I was the smartest boy in the Hitler Youth. I was a founding member with honours to my name, and I’m going to be promoted to general long before my contemporaries. And you’re going to help me, you ignorant whore. It’s quite a coup to catch a spy at Reich HQ, you know.’

Hannah continued to stare at him, her eyes unflinching as she watched him fluff himself up with his own sense of self-importance and superiority.

‘I’m asking you one more time, and if you don’t answer, I’ll do more than slap you, you traitor bitch.’

Hannah’s eyes never wavered from his, and the more she stared at him, the more furious he became until his face was bright red and a vein pulsed in his thick neck.

‘Who do you work for? I’m warning you, it’s time to give me some answers. I found the camera in your handbag. So clever, aren’t we?’ he hissed, his tone mocking. ‘Not quite as clever as you thought, though. Your game is up mademoiselle and now you’re going to pay a deadly price.’

CHAPTER 32

Lizzie's hands stung from the cold as she descended to the basement to spend another night in the bowels of the old farmhouse. This time, she would be alone. If someone came to search the place, she wouldn't be caught sleeping in the bedroom like a sitting duck. She ran back upstairs and grabbed one of Hannah's guns from the secret compartment beneath the big old sink. The house was deathly quiet, and she went to pull another blanket off her bed. It seemed to get ever colder, but perhaps she was just tired. It had been an intense couple of days, and her body throbbed and ached all over from the fall off the bicycle. She needed sleep if she was to be any use to anyone tomorrow.

When she awoke to the insistent chirping of birds, she listened carefully for noises in the house. All was quiet until *The Count of Monte Cristo* toppled off her stomach and crashed to the floor, making her heart pound.

Hesitantly, she opened the secret hatch and stepped out of the damp basement. She'd slept reasonably well, cocooned between a pile of blankets to cushion her body and keep out the chill .

Lizzie checked if Hannah had slipped into her bedroom during the night, but the covers on her bed lay untouched. She went downstairs to the kitchen as first light broke, seeping through the blackout blinds in delicate shards and drawing shapes on the walls. She'd made it through another night in occupied territory. That was the first night she'd spent alone on a mission. Even when things went awry when she was a new agent, the owner of the safe house kept her company.

She sat in silence, contemplating her options as she drank the warm coffee. Lizzie knew what she should do, but it was too early to leave without attracting unnecessary attention. More attention was not what the network needed.

The coffee cup was nursed in her hands, and the heat on her skin and the gentle chatter of the birds in the garden cheered her. Then she remembered the raven from the previous night, staring at her from the tree opposite the attic window. She told herself she was being fanciful, thinking the black bird had anything to do with Jack watching over her, but its musical call had comforted her, nonetheless.

Thinking of Jack transported her back to London, and she wondered what he was doing at this moment. He was an early riser, and he might be drinking coffee and thinking of her too. If only she could pick up the telephone and dial his number at home. What she wouldn't do to hear his rich deep voice say her name in that special way that was like a caress. Her eyes strayed to the telephone on the wall, but even if the line was in service, which it wasn't, she couldn't call London. That would be signing her own death warrant.

Lizzie pulled a blanket up to her nose, the bitter cold filtering through her nightdress. As she rested her head against the sofa, Jack's face loomed in her mind, and she was swept back to that morning when he surprised her by calling her at home, which was not something he usually did unless it was an emergency.

Christmas fell on a crisp, snowy day and Lizzie was in the kitchen helping her mother make some strange concoction that would have to pass for mince pies. Her mother said it was the best they could do with the ingredients available, but they should at least attempt to have some festive foods.

Lizzie loved cooking with her mother, and as they buzzed about the kitchen, the radio played Christmas carols, interjected with news about current events. Rose was particularly happy because Archie was on leave for a few days over the holiday. They

hadn't seen Lizzie's older brother Archie for months and her mother could not stop the tears when he appeared at the door, beaming at them just like the old Archie they knew and loved.

Archie was in the front drawing room overlooking the beautiful snow-white park, playing cards with their sisters, and her father glanced at them occasionally from his chair by the fire, as he flicked through the newspaper.

'They're ready to go in,' Rose said, when Lizzie finished laying the decorative holly shaped pastry pieces on the mince pie tops and she popped the tray into the oven. Violet, their wonderful housekeeper, had gone to her sister's for the day, and it was rare for just Lizzie and her mother to be working in the kitchen together. Lizzie hummed quietly as she tidied.

The phone shrilled several times, and no one went to answer it, so she dusted her floury hands onto her apron and hurried into the hallway. 'Marylebone 482,' she said, wondering who was calling on Christmas Day. Jack's deep voice echoed over the line, and she smiled.

'Darling. How fortunate you answered. I want to wish you Happy Christmas,' he said.

'Thank you,' she replied, aware that everyone could hear her side of the conversation .

'Are you surrounded?' Jack asked.

'Yes, something like that. Have a wonderful Christmas, Val,' Lizzie said. 'Do you need me tomorrow?'

Jack's familiar voice rippled over the line, causing goosebumps to erupt on her flesh.

‘Oh yes, I most definitely need you tomorrow, Seagrove. Another day without you will be a torrid way to spend Christmas.’

‘Very well, I shall report for duty first thing.’

‘Report for duty at my flat and let’s celebrate our Christmas tomorrow,’ he said. ‘I miss you too much when you’re away.’

Lizzie laughed at him saying she was away when she was only at her parents’ house. ‘I know what you mean,’ she said guardedly, as her mother crossed through to the drawing room to tell the others when lunch would be served. ‘I’d better go now. See you tomorrow. Have a lovely time at your mother’s.’

‘Thank you, I’m leaving soon.’

‘Bye, then,’ she said, wishing she could declare on Christmas Day how madly she loved him. Lizzie had learnt that secret love affairs were painful, because you couldn’t express your true feelings and had to pretend the person you loved was just another colleague.

She was about to ring off, thrilled he’d called her, but sad that they couldn’t be together on this special day. How wonderful it would be if he could walk over after lunch and join them for a festive afternoon tea.

‘Darling,’ he said, still hanging on the phone. ‘I can’t wait to see you tomorrow. Come as early as you can.’

Lizzie said she would, her stomach fizzing at his passionate declaration as she replaced the receiver on the cradle and followed her mother into the drawing room.

‘Work?’ her father asked pointedly .

She nodded. 'Yes, just Val. I need to go into the office tomorrow.'

Her mother exclaimed, 'Oh, what a shame. I thought we'd at least have Boxing Day together as well, whilst Archie's home.'

'I know Ma, but it'll give you a chance to mollycoddle him all the more,' she laughed, winking at her older brother.

Rose replied, 'The war doesn't stop for Christmas, I suppose. We're fortunate to have this one special day together. Let's hope the Jerries are taking it easy today and we get to eat lunch without an air raid.'

Lizzie looked around at her family. It was unusual to see them together these days, and their life in Jersey seemed more and more like a nostalgic childhood memory.

'I have good news,' Pa said, laying his newspaper to one side on the small table. Lizzie looked at him expectantly. 'Hold on, I must check our pies, so they don't burn.'

When she bustled back into the drawing room, they were all waiting impatiently for her return. 'Go on, what is this good news? We could certainly do with some.'

'It's about Jersey,' Reginald said, as if he had read her mind earlier.

'Oh, tell us, Reg,' begged Rose, removing imaginary fluff from the sleeve of her dress as she waited. 'What news?'

'After Christmas, we can send a note to Nan and Pops through the Red Cross Message Service.'

The memory of that lovely Christmas day faded from her mind. The dregs of seedy

coffee in her cup had lost their heat, and Lizzie swallowed the last of it and grimaced. It was time to get dressed and brave the city to look for Philippe. She was counting on him to help her find Hannah .

Unless Philippe had been arrested too. Then she would be completely alone in Paris.

CHAPTER 33

Back on the road, Lizzie cycled as fast as she could, mindful of the frosty surface and the worn tyres. Her body ached even more from her nighttime tumble, and she had borrowed a pair of Hannah's gloves to protect her bruised hand. The trees were a dull brown and bare apart from remnants of snowfall on their naked branches. The scene was one of bleak winter and Lizzie was grateful for the warm boots and thick coat she'd taken from Hannah's cupboard. They were almost the same size, which was lucky, or keeping warm would have been more difficult. Dropping in with just a parachute and a small case was all very well in summer, but she lacked enough clothing to see her through these bitter temperatures.

Lizzie dismounted her bicycle and left it propped against a wall close to the address, where she hoped to spot Philippe. Hannah had told her he worked in an office there, but she didn't know more than that. It was a long shot, because she had relied on Francois to update him. Now Francois was out of the picture, she must try to reach Philippe directly.

It was too cold to sit outside and wait for him to emerge from the building at lunchtime. She was counting on him doing so, or she would have to wait all day until he finished work in the late afternoon or early evening. Lizzie scoured the area, looking for a nondescript café or restaurant that wasn't popular with the Nazis. She couldn't afford another run in with Karl, or someone like him, so she trod carefully along the snow-coated pavement, peering in windows to see where she might sit to shield from the cold and grab a bite to eat. Lizzie turned into a suitable café and ordered a bowl of chicken soup and a bread roll to quash her hunger pangs.

Looking around the café, she saw the usual smatterings of French and German customers. There was no one intimidating, and she settled down at her table overlooking the square where Philippe worked. She could see the main door and kept her eyes peeled so she wouldn't miss him. He was her best chance at forming a strategy to locate and rescue Hannah if needed. She had a list of unfamiliar Liberty Network names, but Philippe had worked closely with the network leader, so she was hopeful he would rise to the challenge.

A half hour went by, and she finished her thin soup, made from hot water and chicken flavouring, with no visible pieces of chicken. That would have been too much to hope for.

Lizzie's clothes were falling away from her trim figure as she lost more weight each week. Even during the height of the Blitz, she ate regular meals. They lacked a variety of ingredients in wartime London, but the rations in Paris were meagre beyond belief. The Germans took the best produce for themselves, and the locals had to make do with whatever they could scabble together. Lizzie thought longingly of her mother and Violet's tasty inventive meals waiting for her when she came home after a long day at Baker Street.

She was dreaming of mashed potato with a knob of Jersey butter when she caught sight of a man who resembled Philippe, exiting the building and turning onto the street in front of her. Lizzie had already settled her bill, so she scrambled to her feet, shot out of the café and hurried along behind the man, almost slipping.

Was it Philippe?

She'd only seen him at night, wearing dark clothes and presumably trying not to look like his daytime persona. He hurried, and she had to rush to keep up with him. After a few minutes, she entered a small park, anxious not to lose sight of the man. She turned a corner, and a firm hand caught her wrist and pulled her off the path and

towards the wall into the shadows.

‘It’s you!’ Philippe said.

‘Get off. You are hurting me!’ Lizzie exclaimed, wrenching her wrist from his steely grip. ‘Who did you think it was?’

Philippe lowered his arm, and he retrieved a packet of cigarettes and offered one to Lizzie. She hadn’t smoked recently, but she accepted the cigarette as it was a good cover for loitering in the snowy park at lunchtime.

‘Thank you,’ she said, taking a drag and resisting a cough. She still hadn’t got the hang of smoking and doubted she ever would.

‘I didn’t expect to see you when I’m at work. Why were you following me?’ Philippe asked, casting his eyes around furtively.

Lizzie examined him from head to toe and took in his expensive tailored suit and polished leather shoes. He didn’t look remotely like the saboteur she knew from their nighttime operations. ‘You’re so smart. I barely recognised you,’ she said, her eyes widening. ‘I assumed you had some kind of manual job. ’

‘First rule of espionage,’ he said, dropping his voice lower and puffing on his cigarette. ‘Assume nothing.’

‘My mistake,’ Lizzie said, berating herself again for being such an amateur. It had not occurred to her that a member of the Liberty Network, who blew up Nazi supply trains by night, could be a high-profile administrator of some sort by day.

‘We’d better make it quick. I don’t know who might be watching me,’ he said. ‘What do you need?’

‘I think they’ve got Angel. She disappeared yesterday. Never returned from her job at German High Command.’

Philippe raised an eyebrow. ‘That’s where she’s working? My God, she moves in treacherous circles. I thought I was skating on thin ice.’

Lizzie nodded. ‘Yes, she’s been doing an incredible job, but after they got Francois, we’ve been worried he would talk, and they’d arrest us.’

‘Have you any news of Francois?’ he asked, turning his body slightly away from her as if he was surveying the park, whilst he spoke out of the side of his mouth in-between puffs.

‘No, no news. Angel hoped to glean something at work, but I don’t know if she did or not. As I said, she’s disappeared.’

‘Are you certain?’ he asked, checking his watch. ‘I have something to deliver and must go soon. Angel is not known for her predictable behaviour. She may have gone on a mission during the night.’

‘I don’t believe that is the case. We had arranged a time to meet after she finished work, and she didn’t show up. Then she didn’t come home either. It’s not like her. She knew we might be under surveillance, and we were working closely together to salvage the situation and decide what to do.’

‘I see,’ Philippe said, frowning and stubbing out his cigarette.

Lizzie leaned closer to him. ‘My gut says she’s still in the Reich building. We need to break her out before they break her.’

Philippe squinted as he stared into the distance. ‘I wish she’d mentioned she was

working there. As it happens, one of my informants works there on the cleaning team.'

Lizzie's pulse raced as she studied him. 'That sounds promising. What do you suggest?'

They quickly formulated a plan, and Philippe left the park by one gate, and Lizzie by another. She approached the back of the former hotel that now housed German High Command, following Philippe's instructions to the letter. She wanted to get her bearings for later. He was familiar with the building because he frequently liaised with the administrative department, and he had even met Hannah's boss. On one of his early visits, he recognised a cleaner from his youth and recruited her into his network.

Lizzie walked around the city to pass the time, noting useful details of Parisian logistics to pass to the SOE, as instructed. A few hours later, she returned to the street near German High Command and perched on a bench, pretending to be engrossed in a copy of the new *Pariser Zeitung*, a German newspaper. Hannah had told her it was published for the sole purpose of showcasing how Paris was thriving under German occupation. Hannah said she gnashed her teeth when she scoured it for clues of Nazi plans, which made Lizzie howl with laughter.

Dear Hannah. Where was she?

Still clutching the unpopular newspaper, she stood and walked briskly towards a woman who fitted the description Phillipe had given her. She reached the woman before she neared the back entrance of German High Command and stopped her with a greeting. She caught the woman's attention and said, 'The weather is fine today, is it not?'

The woman was dressed in overalls and had her hair swept up in a scarf, and looked

exactly how Lizzie would expect a cleaner to look.

The cleaner was startled but replied, 'Indeed, it is a good day.' She stared at Lizzie expectantly.

'Do you have a few minutes to talk? Our good friend, Philippe, sent me.' Lizzie knew Philippe must be a cover name, but the woman recognised it immediately and fell into step with her as they turned into a side road. Lizzie produced a pack of cigarettes and offered one to the cleaner. Situations like this were exactly why she'd learnt to smoke. 'Celine, correct?'

The woman nodded but refused a cigarette. 'I don't smoke.'

Lizzie lit her second cigarette of the day and coughed as the acrid smoke filled her mouth and she avoided inhaling.

Celine looked amused. 'I don't think you do either.'

'I need a pass to get into the offices where Major General Hans is based. Do you know him?' she asked, her voice lowering as she dipped her head and took another puff of noxious fumes.

'Yes,' Celine replied. 'I clean his offices every day.'

'And do you know his secretary, Collette?'

'I do,' she said. 'The kind blonde woman.'

'When did you last see her, do you recall?' Lizzie probed.

'Hmm, I think it was yesterday,' Celine said, frowning as she tried to remember.

‘And was there anything out of the ordinary that you noticed?’

‘There was actually. The major general was in his office first thing when I would usually clean it and he had a visitor, another officer. The visitor seemed nice—nicer than the major general, that’s for sure. I warned Collette her boss was in early.’

‘Here’s the thing, Celine,’ Lizzie said. ‘I need your help to get me into those offices so I can see what happened to Collette. She didn’t come home last night, and Philippe and I think the major general may have her.’

Celine looked worried. ‘But I only have passes for the team. They are personalised.’

‘Is there someone on the team who resembles me a little?’ Lizzie asked.

They talked for a few more minutes and agreed on a course of action. Celine gave Lizzie an address, which she memorised before they parted, and the cleaner ran up the steps and into the service entrance.

Excitement rushed through Lizzie. It was game on.

CHAPTER 34

Hans became more and more agitated by his traitor-secretary's resilience and ability to withstand the damage he was doing to her pretty face. There was something about her that both incensed him and made him desire her even more. He felt himself harden. If she didn't tell him what he wanted to know soon, he would take her here and now.

He sighed. Who was he kidding? He would have her whatever she said or didn't say. Hans had been in an almost frenzied state of lust ever since the first moment he laid eyes on her.

Yes, she would be his soon, and she would beg for mercy with her impudent mouth and full lips. He'd sensed she was different from the beginning, but he couldn't put his finger on it. He burned to have her and the more she resisted him, fending him off like a slippery eel, the more determined he became to make her his.

Last week, the general summoned him to his lavish quarters, like he was some kind of subservient messenger. He barked at Hans that there was a leak at the highest level and the Gestapo had narrowed it down to either German High Command or German Military Intelligence. The general grilled him about staff turnover and if anything had changed in the chain of command recently.

Apparently, there was a dramatic increase in Wehrmacht trains being blown up, rail tracks and bridges destroyed, and enemies of the Reich escaping just before the Gestapo arrived to arrest them. They concluded it was no coincidence and someone was leaking intelligence to the Resistance. The Gestapo detested members of the

Resistance almost as much as they abhorred Jews, and they wrought agonising vengeance on them at every opportunity. They meant to stamp out all opposition to the Reich. Hans heard rumours about the inventive torture methods being introduced at Avenue Foch, and an increasing number of political prisoners, influential Jews, and captured agents were subjected to the most barbaric treatment.

The general had dismissed Hans like a naughty student who had made a mistake in his homework, and Hans fumed with resentment. When he returned to his office, it was late, and Collette had already left for the day. He poked about her desk, looking for anything incriminating. He hadn't suspected her because she seemed so dedicated to the work, despite her obvious reluctance to service his sexual appetite. She was the most efficient secretary he had ever had, and it was such a shame she wasn't more amenable to his physical needs. Collette was as punctual and polite as a German and didn't fall foul of some of the slovenly habits so typical of the French. She didn't smoke, she prepared his coffee in just the way he liked, and she responded to his frequent and often angry outbursts with a calmness that restored his focus.

He'd concluded she would be the perfect secretary if it wasn't for her unwillingness to have sex with him. Not that he'd asked her in so many words because it was clear she would refuse, and Hans did not bear rejection well. He had pussyfooted around her for some time now, hoping to wear her down gradually until she understood how beneficial it would be for them both if she were to come to his bed at night and not just sit in his office by day.

A moan escaped her, and he swallowed hard at the sight of her writhing on the chair, her blonde hair escaping her plaits and falling seductively onto her shoulders. He wanted to part her legs and push into her over and over until she screamed for mercy, but he warned himself to slow down. There was no rush. He had as long as he needed, and his greatest erotic fantasy was that she would beg for it rather than him forcing her into submission.

The truth was, he had become obsessed with his French secretary, even to the point where he fantasised she would fall in love with him, and they would be together after the war. The vision of returning to his former life with his wife was unpalatable, and he intended to avoid that future at all costs. Still, how would he reconcile a French wife with the glorious career he had mapped out for himself? The Reich would look down on such a match, especially if he abandoned his German wife, who was from excellent stock and a wealthy family. It was a problem he had tussled with ever since he'd become consumed by Collette.

But now even the possibility of a life together was ruined.

‘Why couldn’t you be a good girl? We could have avoided all this unpleasantness if you’d only behaved as you should.’

Hannah fired daggers at him with her blue eyes and if such a thing were possible, he would have keeled over at the intensity of the hatred in their depths.

‘My beautiful Collette. Life could have been so wonderful for us, but you had to wreck it, didn’t you? Now tell me who you work for, and I’ll show you some mercy if you’re a good girl and see the error of your ways. Will you do that for me?’ Hans reached out and trailed his fingers across her bruised and bleeding face. The sight of her distress only inflamed him more, and he lowered his hand to unbuckle his belt and lay it to one side. That would be useful soon. Hans couldn’t hold himself back anymore—he wanted her too much to think straight. He would take her hard and fast, and then he would continue the torture to squeeze the information out of her. He hadn’t reported his suspicions to the general or the Gestapo yet.

They would take her for themselves. Why should he let those incompetent fools have all the fun? Hans dropped his trousers and pulled his pants down, releasing his throbbing member so it waved in front of his helpless prisoner’s face.

Hannah clamped her thighs together. But Hans had other plans.

As he ripped the tape off in one swift move, she gave an involuntary cry. He hardened again at the vulnerable sound, and he was close to bursting. He must take his pleasure before it was too late. Hans shoved his shaft between her pink lips, forcing her to take him in her mouth with the weight of his body. Her hands were tied, and she couldn't move.

Hans lost himself in the touch of her on his flesh and the nightly fantasies he'd been having for what seemed like forever carried him far away from his private rooms on Avenue Kléber. He steeled himself to hold back. A deep sense of victory that she had seen the error of her ways and was complying with his desires overcame him.

'Good girl,' he said, his throat thick with lust as he gripped her hair. Hannah pulled away, and he groaned, the sense of loss devastating .

'I was wrong to resist you, Major General. It's just that I didn't want you to think I was easy.'

'You're far from easy,' he growled, almost ready to erupt into the sweetness of her. He was losing his mind. Even in his wildest dreams, he hadn't experienced delight such as this. His wife did nothing for him, and although he'd frequented the Paris brothels out of sheer desperation and loneliness, the whores didn't do it for him like this.

'Untie my hands, and let me touch you,' Hannah gasped, as if she was as turned on by the violent scenario as him. 'I didn't know it could be as exciting as this.'

'Don't stop,' Hans ordered, and he thrust back into her as he untied her hands. 'Here,' he said, 'now you can touch me properly with those small, delicate hands of yours.'

Hannah moaned seductively, and then she took her opportunity and bit down hard, her teeth searing into his bulging flesh. He let out a blood-curdling scream as his whole body jerked and hummed in agony and he couldn't think straight.

Before he could say another word or make a move, Hannah kned him in his groin, causing him to emit another haunting noise. Then, as he hunched over, she took full advantage of his weakened state and reached for a heavy brass ornament on the table and slammed it into his head with all her strength.

He screeched like a wild animal and as he clutched his bleeding head; he tottered on his feet as though he were about to lose balance. His large body drooped, and Hannah pushed him onto the blood-spattered chair and he collapsed. She cast her eyes around the dimly lit Nazi horror chamber for the cord and tape he had used to tie her up. Hastily, she cut a new length of cord and bound his hands to the back of the chair and peeled fresh tape to seal his slack mouth. For good measure, she secured each of his legs in their shiny black leather jackboots to the chair.

Only then did she sit back on her heels to take stock of her handiwork. 'How do you like it when the shoe is on the other foot, Major General?'

Hannah gazed with satisfaction at the suffering she had inflicted on the Nazi officer.

Hans grunted in pain as he slipped in and out of delirium.

CHAPTER 35

Lizzie arrived at the service entrance of German High Command at 6 p.m. wearing a cleaner's outfit and a headscarf like Celine's, who stood waiting for her outside, shifting from one foot to the other.

Lizzie beamed a smile and greeted Celine. 'Act natural like I'm one of your team,' she said out of the side of her mouth as they mounted the steps.

The security wasn't as tight at the back, which Lizzie thought stupid because that was the weak spot someone like her would exploit.

A young soldier with a rifle slung over his shoulder moved towards them. 'ID,' he said, looking at Lizzie, stifling a yawn. He'd been on duty all day, and guarding the service entrance was known as one of the duller jobs in the building. The guards only admitted cleaners, delivery workers and maintenance people, and didn't get to meet anyone important like the guards at the main entrance did. The soldier gave the ID card a cursory glance and his eyes flickered from the card to Lizzie and back again. 'Why are you later than the rest of the cleaning crew?' he asked, now more alert.

Celine leant closer and said in a hushed tone. 'She was unwell with a cold but is feeling much better now and there's a lot to do. We need her.'

The soldier jumped backwards as though he'd been burnt and waved them in without another word.

When they reached the large cupboard under the back staircase and Celine ushered Lizzie inside to kit her out with supplies, she whispered, 'The Nazis have a morbid fear of illness. The fastest way to get them off your back is to say you're sick.'

'I shall remember that!' said Lizzie.

Celine continued, 'The rest of the crew should be in different parts of the building. I checked earlier, but Collette wasn't there. The major general may be away on business. I didn't see him at all today.'

Where was Hannah if she wasn't in this building? That her boss conveniently was nowhere to be seen, when Lizzie knew from Hannah's reports that he was usually in his office every day, heightened Lizzie's suspicions that something had gone horribly wrong.

Celine's forecast was correct, and the building was deserted as they walked up the sweeping marble staircase carrying their buckets and mops. Lizzie scanned the area, alert for unwanted surprises, but all was quiet as she followed Celine across the landing and stood behind her waiting whilst she tapped on the door and called out to see if anyone was inside. A moment passed with no response, so she rattled her big key chain, selected a large silver key and turned it in the lock and opened the door. Celine turned to Lizzie when they entered the outer office and placed one finger over her lips to urge Lizzie to stay quiet.

Lizzie held her breath. She realised she was moving her lips, praying silently that nothing terrible had befallen Hannah. She couldn't bear it if her friend, who over recent weeks had become like a real sister, had met a violent end. If someone deserved a happy ending, it was Hannah. She had never known anyone with such a tragic story, and she understood now why Jack felt such responsibility for the tough Resistance leader who would be the first to say she was perfectly capable of looking after herself.

Please let that be true . Lizzie assessed the empty room. Everything was tidy and as you might expect an excellent secretary's office to be.

'Do you notice anything strange?' she whispered to Celine, who was dusting as if she hadn't just aided an enemy of the Reich to enter their headquarters. Lizzie saw why Philippe had recruited her to his network. She was calm and going about her business as if nothing unusual had happened. Some people were naturally suited to this type of work. Lizzie still had so much to learn, and one of the biggest surprises was how much she was learning about people.

Celine whispered that she didn't.

Lizzie pointed to the door to the main office, that she guessed was the major general's inner sanctum. 'Do you clean in there too?' she mouthed.

Celine nodded. Lizzie gestured for her to open the door as she stood to one side, out of sight, whilst the cleaner repeated the routine of tapping, calling out and then locating the correct key and sliding it into the lock until the door clicked open. Celine entered the room, scanned the interior and then signalled it was safe to follow her in. Lizzie entered stealthily even in her ungainly cleaner's boots and crossed the large imposing office to the window. What a view of Paris. She could see why Hannah's boss chose this office.

Lizzie inhaled and squared her shoulders as if to prepare herself for any eventuality. Then she methodically opened every cupboard and searched for anything that might give her a clue about where Hannah was. When she finished checking, she released a sigh, relief washing over her.

Thank God. Hannah wasn't lying dead in a cupboard.

Lizzie's heartbeat gradually regulated, and she walked across the room to where

Celine was cleaning. She had explained to Lizzie, she could let her in, but she had a job to do and needed to be out on time if they weren't to raise suspicion. With Lizzie swapping places with one of the crew who had a similar look, they were one woman down, and Celine was working fast to make up for it.

Now Lizzie pointed to the opposite wall. The offices were like a maze and there was yet another identical interior door. Hannah had mentioned her boss had a suite of rooms, but she hadn't accessed them yet. She hoped she would find more secrets to pass to London and planned to break into the rooms but was waiting for him to be away.

Celine told Lizzie she didn't have access to the major general's private rooms. Lizzie searched through the desk drawers for a key but couldn't find one. Fortunately, she was prepared and bent her head as she undid her leather belt. She lay it across the surface of the desk and twisted the belt pin until it slid out of the clasp, and she pushed the end until it transformed into a clever little lockpick. Charlie, the SOE trainer's face, appeared in her mind as she worked. He had shown her how to unpick locks and now she nodded to Celine to follow the plan.

The cleaner laid her mop down and crossed the room to knock on the door. She tapped twice and called out the major general's name. Lizzie had told her to think of a reasonable excuse for disturbing him in case he was in his rooms, but no excuse was needed. There was no response, and no sound could be heard from beyond the locked door.

Lizzie guided Celine to the desk chair and deftly extracted the cord from her pocket and tied the cleaner's hands behind her back and loosely patted a piece of tape over her mouth. It was Philippe's recommendation, so that if Celine was seen, it would look like the enemy had duped her, and there wouldn't be murderous reprisals by the Nazis.

Then Lizzie turned her attention to the door and inserted the tool into the lock. It took a few minutes of twisting and turning the lockpick until she heard the click. This was the first time she'd unpicked a lock in the field, and it gave her a thrill.

She patted her overalls and was reassured to feel the hard object nestled in the deep pocket. Then she turned to Celine, who sat obediently on the chair watching her. Lizzie signalled she was going in and tentatively opened the door.

The first thing that hit her was the overpowering smell in the room. It was a mixture of sweat and something else she couldn't quite place. Lizzie fumbled about in the dark, with only a faint glow from the dim evening streetlights filtering into the room. Her fingers located a switch on the wall, which she flicked, and the light came on.

Lizzie blinked and got her bearings as she gazed around the room. There was Nazi memorabilia on every surface and an ominous swastika hung on the wall in pride of place. It was like a temple to Hitler, and she saw photos of him and his vile gang lining the shelves. She poked about, searching for clues of where Hannah might be, careful not to make any noise. There was no sign of a scuffle, and doubt crept into Lizzie's mind. Perhaps her gut had led her wrong this time and Hannah really had been called away on urgent Resistance business and hadn't been able to let her know.

It could be, Lizzie reasoned, but she still had a nagging sense that something wasn't right. Celine had warned her they didn't have long and must get out of the building before the night watchmen began their rounds. Lizzie glanced at her watch. It was almost 6.30 p.m. Celine said the guards came around when she was usually about to leave at 7 p.m. Lizzie's eyes lit on a door presumably leading into yet another room, and she tiptoed towards it. This was some set up; no wonder Hannah wanted to access his private rooms. Had she done so, and been caught in the act?

Potential scenarios of how Hannah had been detected swirled around her brain, and her heart thudded furiously as she withdrew her gun from her pocket and stood poised

to enter the next room. For all she knew, the major general might have imprisoned her there. Hannah said he was a pervert, and she had been fending his advances off since the beginning.

Lizzie listened carefully, her ear to the door, but there was no sound. She touched the door handle and turned it gently, gun positioned just like she had been trained at the stately home in her induction into the Special Operations Executive. She readied herself to swoop into the room and rescue Hannah. Lizzie was counting on an element of surprise.

Lizzie calculated the major general wouldn't expect an avenging British agent to show up, and that would be his downfall.

A memory of another Nazi officer ambushed Lizzie, and she pushed it firmly away. She needed all her wits about her, and there was no room for confusion in the field. Lizzie opened the door slowly and stuck her head around the frame. It was even darker and only the light from the other room filtered in as if there were no windows. She stepped inside, expecting to find an empty space in a new room, but her leg nudged something solid, and she gasped, only just stopping an involuntary shriek. Her fingers explored further in the dark and her eyes couldn't make out any detail except that something was in front of her. The smell of sweat was now overpowering, and the other smell she couldn't identify permeated her nostrils again, making her heave. She sought another light switch but couldn't find one. This was no good. She couldn't see a thing. It must be some kind of storeroom or cupboard, so she would need a torch or lamp to see what was inside.

Lizzie re-entered the other room, crossed to the door, and poked her head out to check on Celine. She was still sitting as she had left her, but when their eyes met, she saw an urgency in them. Celine knew the time was ticking, and she moved her head toward the door as if to tell her to hurry.

Lizzie held up one hand, indicating she needed five more minutes, and then she went to Hannah's desk and located a torch and hurried back into the other room and towards the cupboard. There was an awful odour in there and Lizzie was trying not to fear the worst, but a dreadful possibility loomed in her mind. Lizzie swallowed down the rising panic as the smell hit her again.

Had the major general murdered Hannah?

Lizzie shone the light into the cupboard. Her instinct was to scream, but she clamped her mouth shut like the experienced agent she had become. Before her, a blood-soaked head drooped onto a blood-spattered chest.

CHAPTER 36

Jack called an emergency meeting with Val. She listened with growing concern etched on her face as he explained why Lizzie had not made the pickup.

‘It’s time for me to go in,’ he said.

‘We’d really rather you didn’t,’ she said, her brow creasing into a heavy frown.

‘I know. You want me here wrapped in cotton wool, but it’s time for me to get my hands dirty again.’

Val tutted. ‘It’s nothing to do with wrapping you in cotton wool. You understand the reasons it’s better for you to stay in London. If you get caught, you know far too much.’

‘Thanks for the vote of confidence,’ Jack said, lighting a cigarette and exhaling pointedly until smoke rings circled over his head like an omen.

‘Don’t be like that. We must think of the overall success of the agency.’

‘I am thinking of our overall success!’ he said, shaking his head so his shock of black hair flopped onto his forehead, and he shoved it aside impatiently with one large hand. ‘If Lizzie and Hannah are both compromised, the whole of the Liberty Network is compromised, which means we’re essentially back to square one with our Paris operations.’

Val paced back and forth, not saying a word as she thought it over. After what seemed to Jack like a lifetime, she said, ‘What do you have in mind?’

‘Don’t worry. If it all goes terribly wrong and they’re about to capture me, I’ll swallow my poison pill.’

Val rolled her eyes. ‘You think that scenario encourages me to give you the go ahead? Do you even know me?’

‘Look, obviously I know you’d rather I didn’t poison myself, but I just want to be clear if that’s what it takes to protect our people and intelligence, then I’ll do it without a second thought.’

Val sank into a chair, sighing. ‘It’s like choosing between the devil and the deep blue sea.’

‘No, no, it’s not at all. If I go in quickly, there’s a high chance I can reach the girls and stop the operation going bad. It’s a lot for them to handle. Too many moving parts.’

Val raised an eyebrow. ‘Do I detect a glimmer of the knight in shining armour swooping in on his white horse to save the damsels in distress?’

Jack snorted. ‘What nonsense! It’s nothing like that. Lizzie is still very new in the field—a concern I raised repeatedly before she left—and who knows what’s happened to Hannah at German High Command? Talking about the devil, Hannah is playing with fire in hell as private secretary to a Nazi.’

‘It’s just as well you’re not harbouring romantic notions of saving those two. Let me tell you now, they are both hard as nails. Hannah can take care of herself—she’s shown that time and again. And as for Lizzie, you saw how she handled herself in

Reims. She's born for this. If I was a gambling woman, I would put my money on her succeeding any day of the week. That girl has grit running through her veins. You should have more faith in her. '

Jack exhaled again. This wasn't the response he had hoped for when he explained to Val about Hannah's disappearance and Lizzie failing to make the pickup. It was typical Val, though. She always had total belief in her operatives and she championed Lizzie's competence relentlessly. After all, it was Val who had sent her back into occupied France. If it was up to him, she'd be safely out of harm's way, decoding messages in the cipher room.

Was he being overprotective because they were his agents? He shook his head, his heart sinking. It was a pointless question. Of course he was overprotective. The fear of Lizzie being arrested was a vice gripping his chest every night as he struggled to drift off to sleep. All he could think about was what she was doing and whether she was safe. He had known the dangers of falling for an agent who was active in wartime missions. It was a recipe for disaster, and he would not have chosen the situation for himself or for Lizzie. He should have held his ground about not getting involved and spared them this heart wrenching agony every time one of them went undercover. He should have, but he hadn't, and who was he kidding? As if he could have turned his feelings for her off like a faucet. His all-consuming love for Lizzie was as ungovernable as the tides. From the minute he laid eyes on her, he had been swept away and hadn't stood a chance.

And then there was Hannah. How could he not protect his brother's fiancé? It was painful enough he was risking his life in the skies every day, but Jack could not be the one to tell Henry something had happened to Hannah. His brother would never forgive him if any harm befell her. It was Jack who had recruited her, and for this reason alone, he would do anything in his power to keep her safe.

'What was the last you heard?' Val asked, her words crisp. She wasn't one to be

overwhelmed by emotion, and if she knew he and Lizzie were involved, she would be disappointed in him for allowing it to happen.

‘Lizzie said she wasn’t going to the pickup because Hannah was missing, and she couldn’t leave without finding her. A member of the network was shot in a sabotage op and the fear is he may have cracked.’

‘The reality is if they are compromised, they could already be in the hands of the Gestapo,’ Val said, tapping her pencil on the desk as she spoke.

‘Theoretically, yes. But sufficient time has passed, so there’s a high chance he didn’t tell the bastards a damn thing.’

‘And where does Lizzie think Hannah is?’

‘Lizzie thinks they may have detained her at German High Command, and she was making a plan to break her out.’

Val smirked. ‘I told you she was born for this. Which new agent plans to break someone out of a Reich building in the centre of occupied Paris?’

‘I know, I know. She’s courageous beyond words. Too courageous for her own good, and you know how unruly Hannah can be. I think a bit of support from me will be just what they need. And if they don’t need it, I’ll stay in the shadows and be on the next flight out of there.’

‘You must miss being in the field very much. The thrill is addictive, isn’t it?’

‘I suppose there’s that, but honestly, I wouldn’t go in if I didn’t think it was necessary. Thrilling or not, it’s hardly a picnic dropping into occupied France in the depths of winter.’

Val shrugged her shoulders. 'Let me talk to the big man and see what he says. Ultimately, it's up to him.'

Jack's laugh was genuine. 'We both know that's not quite true. Come on, Val. He hangs on your every word. Give me the go ahead this time and I promise I'll be a good boy and sit here wrapped in cotton wool doing whatever it is you want me doing for the rest of the year.'

'That's a big promise. I hope you can keep it Jackie-boy,' she said, smiling. 'You realise it's still only January, and the year has barely begun?'

Jack stubbed his cigarette out, flashing her a charming grin. 'Come on, you know my word is good. Let me go in and put my mind at rest, and if I'm overreacting, I'll leave them in play and fly out immediately.'

Val stood and crossed the room. At the door, she turned. 'You'll have my answer shortly. Don't start packing yet.'

'I always pack light,' he winked, and she laughed and left the room.

In the early hours of the following morning, Jack's French-made leather brown boots touched the snow-coated ground of the woods on the outskirts of Paris. There was no reception committee and no visible moon to light his way. Sometimes one had to land in imperfect conditions. As the icy snowflakes flurried all around him, blurring his vision, he realised this was one of those times.

CHAPTER 37

Hannah's boss wore only a blood-stained shirt. His bottom half was naked, his thighs pale and his trousers ruffled around his boots on the floor.

Lizzie trained her gun on him as a precaution, but she knew before she checked his pulse, the major general wouldn't be bothering Hannah anymore. He was stone cold dead. Lizzie shone the torch around to check if there was any sign of a struggle. The cupboard was tidy, and the assassination, if that's what it was, had all the hallmarks of a professional, right down to the assault on his manhood.

Angel had struck again.

Lizzie closed the door firmly and raced to untie Celine and break the news to her. They collected their cleaning materials and locked the doors behind them. Now to get out of there before someone at German High Command realised the major general was missing. Lizzie followed Celine down the wide staircase, clutching a bucket and mop and trying to act calm as they stored the equipment in the maintenance room.

'Take it nice and steady,' Lizzie whispered to Celine, as they moved towards the back exit where the same soldier stood on duty.

They were nearly at the door when a German voice called to the soldier from the main desk in the lobby. 'The major general has a visitor. Did you see him leave earlier?'

The soldier replied, 'No, I haven't seen the major general today.'

Lizzie waited for the soldier to unlock the back door, acting as though their lives didn't depend on escaping before someone discovered the body of the major general stuffed in a cupboard upstairs in his private suite.

She turned towards the lobby to see who the visitor was. A tall blond officer stared back at her, and her heart dipped as they shared a second of instant mutual recognition. Her senses were on fire. It was the officer from the train who had defended her and then insisted on driving her home with cakes when they saw each other again. It seemed so long ago because every day undercover was like a lifetime. She'd purposely avoided the café where they'd bumped into each so she wouldn't need to fend off more awkward questions.

There was confusion on his face, but as their eyes met, she saw his expression morph into one of admiration. Lizzie didn't touch her gun, but she was ready to shoot if it came to that. If she had to go down in a shower of bullets trying to escape, then that was preferable to being taken by the Gestapo. Lizzie didn't know how high her pain threshold was, and she had no desire to test it. Her cyanide pill nestled in the pendant around her neck.

She braced herself. Her heart thundered as she looked at the officer for a second. Lizzie knew she was taking a risk, and it may have been better to acknowledge him publicly, but she followed her instincts and prayed he would be as keen as her to keep their connection a secret. She turned back to the soldier who bent to unbolt the back door, which swung open. They were only a few steps away from freedom.

'Thank you. Have a good evening,' Celine said.

The soldier wished them the same. Lizzie moved towards the door, fearing a hand on her shoulder at any moment.

Celine was just about to step through the door when a voice from the lobby called,

‘Stop the cleaners.’

Lizzie slid her hand into the pocket of her overalls and touched the grip of her gun that lay cushioned in the folds of the thick material.

‘Ask them if they saw the major general,’ the soldier barked.

The guard turned to Celine and Lizzie, an enquiring expression on his face. ‘You heard. Well?’ he asked.

Celine said, ‘The offices were empty, as they often are.’

The soldier’s eyes assessed Lizzie. ‘And you? Did you see the major general when you were upstairs?’

Lizzie could feel Karl’s eyes boring into her back. She turned slightly so he would see her face when she replied. ‘No, I didn’t see anyone up there, but Celine is in charge.’ She hoped he had heard her reply. There was no reason she shouldn’t have taken a job as a cleaner. She hadn’t told him anything about her life or work, except that she was visiting her sister and staying for a while. Lizzie held her breath, every muscle taut and ready for action.

He stared at her for a few seconds, then nodded his head imperceptibly, and his lips moved as he said something to the soldier in command who gave the order they could go.

The panic drained from Lizzie’s body as her boots touched the icy pavement, and her spirits soared as they walked down the dimly lit street. They had escaped. All she could think about was telling Jack when she returned to London. It was strange not being able to talk to him. She hoped he understood why she must search for Hannah .

‘Thank you,’ Lizzie whispered to Celine, who walked alongside her. ‘I am sorry to have put you in such danger.’

‘Don’t be,’ Celine replied. ‘I’m happy to do it. We can’t let them ride roughshod over us and destroy everything we believe in.’

‘Thank you all the same. What will you do tomorrow?’ asked Lizzie, worrying she would be a suspect when they discovered the major general’s body.

‘Don’t worry about me. I’ll go to work as usual. They see me as a dumb female cleaner. I bet they’d never credit a woman with masterminding the murder of a Nazi officer right under their noses.’

‘I hope you’re right. By the way, did you recognise the officer who was in the lobby just now?’

‘Yes, I believe he’s the major general’s brother,’ Celine replied.

Lizzie stared at Celine as the enormity of their good luck hit her. ‘That was a close shave. Don’t tell anyone anything. Act like it’s just a normal day when you go in next.’

‘I will,’ Celine said.

‘I need to get out of here. All going well, we won’t see each other again,’ Lizzie said.

When they turned the corner, Celine walked in the opposite direction and Lizzie increased her speed. She changed back into her own clothes in the hallway of the cleaner’s house and put the overalls in a bag in a cupboard as instructed. Lizzie had offered to get rid of them, but Celine said if they were in the same condition, it would be safer to return them. The other cleaner would need them for her next shift.

Lizzie exited the house and turned onto the residential street, hurrying towards the bank of the Seine, where she had left her bicycle. There was always a chance that someone had ridden off on it, but so far, the beloved well-used bicycle she'd borrowed from the farmhouse had served her loyally. And there it was, leaning against a tree like an old friend. It was probably too battered to be in great demand.

As Lizzie mounted her bike, she thought of Hannah proposing a plan to assassinate a high-profile general on another occasion. A smile curved her lips as she thought fondly of Hannah and wondered where she could be.

Where would she hide after murdering a Nazi officer? Surely, even Hannah wouldn't stay in the city. She guessed the courageous avenging angel would assassinate every one of the Nazis single-handedly if she got the opportunity. She really was fearless, and the image of the executed officer with his pants down, played in her mind like a movie.

'Jacqueline,' said a gruff voice, making Lizzie jump.

She swivelled her head and saw a man with dark hair, moustache and spectacles looking at her. Lizzie tried to figure out how this stranger knew her name. 'May I help you?'

Then his face cracked into a smile, and she heard a familiar voice. 'Don't you recognise your sister?'

Lizzie stared at the smiling face. 'My God! You had me completely fooled,' she said, her voice low. 'What on earth...? I mean, how did you know where to find me?'

'I followed you,' said Hannah.

'Oh, that is bad news. I didn't suspect anyone was on my tail.' Lizzie berated herself

for not spotting she was being followed, even though she had checked in the reflections in shop windows and paused in doorways several times.

‘I’ve been hiding in the shadows for a long time. It’s difficult to see someone following you in the depths of a winter’s night.’

‘We both need to get out of Paris now,’ Lizzie said.

‘Follow me from a distance,’ Hannah replied. ‘When I enter a door, double check you’ve not been followed and wait a bit before knocking.’

Lizzie watched Hannah mount a bicycle and set off. She waited a few minutes before riding after her and Lizzie could see Hannah’s head bobbing as she pedalled at just the right speed to keep a distance between them. Snow was falling again, and the street was deserted. Anyone with any sense would be at home now, trying to get warm. Lizzie wondered where Hannah was leading her, and was relieved she didn’t need to spend the night searching for her.

Lizzie followed Hannah’s instructions and tapped on a door on a small street. Hannah let her in and soon they were drinking tea in the tiny kitchenette of a studio flat over a small row of shops. One window was smashed, and Lizzie pulled her coat tighter around her.

‘Sorry it’s not quite the standard of the farmhouse,’ Hannah said. ‘It’s the best I could do at such short notice.’

‘What is this place?’

‘I’ve used it as a safe house a few times. The flat belongs to a shop owner who is a friend of the network.’

‘Is it safe for us to stay here tonight, do you think?’ Lizzie asked.

‘It’s about as safe as anywhere. We need to get off the streets, message Jack, and arrange a new pickup for you. Now tell me what you’ve been up to. When I saw you coming out of the German High Command. I could barely believe my eyes!’

Lizzie explained how she had got onto the cleaning team with Celine. ‘When you didn’t make the meeting yesterday, and didn’t return home either, I knew I had to get in there and see if you were alright.’

‘But I could have been anywhere,’ Hannah said.

‘That’s what Philippe said.’ Lizzie laughed. ‘But I had a feeling something had gone wrong at work.’

‘You were right. He was onto me, and I made the almost fatal error of allowing him to lure me into his private rooms.’

Hannah told Lizzie what happened. ‘He knew I was working with someone, so I had no choice but to kill him.’

‘And in what dramatic style!’ Lizzie said, her eyes wide. ‘I was terrified I was going to find you locked in the cupboard, but I should have known better.’

‘That bastard nearly got me,’ Hannah said. ‘It was the closest I’ve come to being caught in a long time. He was smarter than I realised.’

Hannah pulled a rug to one side and poked about on the floor until her fingers found a crack which she pulled, and a tile moved, revealing a space beneath. She bent down and heaved a big dusty bag from the hole, placing it on the table. Lizzie watched as she opened the bag and pulled out a wireless.

‘You are like a genie with a lamp!’ Lizzie said. ‘I never know what you’ve got hidden where.’

‘We have a few backup radios. Can’t rely on one safe house or I’d be long since dead. It’s the only way to outfox the Boche.’

Lizzie fumbled in her handbag and extracted her copy of *The Count of Monte Cristo* .
‘I’d better let Jack know we’re alive.’

CHAPTER 38

Hannah crossed to the window to check there were no ominous vehicles lurking outside. Moving safe house was always dangerous, but they had pushed their luck at the farmhouse and couldn't stay any longer. On the way to work on the last day, she had taken anything vital with her and lodged some of it in a hiding place. She had several secret spots she used to store identity papers, money, and disguise props. Hannah left nothing incriminating behind.

Lizzie barely had any stuff and had brought her critical items with her. The wireless was hidden in the secret compartment, and they hoped no one would find it.

As soon as Lizzie was safely on the plane to England, Hannah planned to get out of Paris. She'd left a marking on Philippe's mailbox to warn him to lay low for a while. Hannah scratched her forehead. The wig was itchy, and she longed to remove it, but she must stay in disguise until she was far away. Her face throbbed, and her lips were cracked. The carefully applied makeup covered the damage the Nazi pig had done to her, but it didn't stop the sting and the soreness of his merciless slaps and punches.

Hans was arrogant until the final moments of his life. When she'd bitten his most treasured possession, she'd taken full advantage of his weakness. She knew she would have to kill him.

Not that she regretted it for a minute, but it was obvious her undercover mission at German High Command was over, and he must die. It was him or her.

She had aimed her gun with the silencer at him, her hand steady, and released three

shots. As the bullets ripped into him, two in his chest, and the third in his head, she said, 'This one's for Francois. This one is for my parents. And this one is for all the Jewish families you've persecuted and murdered.'

Hannah felt no emotion about killing Hans. He was evil and one less Nazi in the world would make it a better place. She knew from all the reports she had read that Hans was responsible for hundreds of deaths, and she had witnessed firsthand how he relished his work.

She turned from the window to see Lizzie watching her.

'Are you alright?' Lizzie asked. 'You've had a tough few days.'

Hannah nodded. 'I did what needed to be done. I thought about killing him before I even took the job. He is the very definition of Hitler's henchmen, glorifying in the murder of Jews and anyone else who gets in their way.' Hannah paused, then continued. 'Francois is dead. I picked up a message from a contact at the morgue.'

Lizzie blanched. 'I am so sorry, Hannah. What a good man he was. How unfair.'

'It was as we suspected. He died from his wounds the day they shot him. That's why no one came after us.'

Lizzie and Hannah looked at each other, both thinking the same thing. Hannah said it first. 'But they will come after us now. The major general was a high-profile figure.' Hannah remembered the dead body tied to the chair in the cupboard and hoped it was still there.

'Yes, we need to get away as quickly as possible. His brother saw me as we were leaving. He came to visit him.'

Hannah's eyes widened. 'Merde. What happened?'

Lizzie explained how they'd escaped.

'That was lucky!'

'Yes, luckier than you might think. His brother was the same officer I met on the train journey to Paris, and the same one I told you about who gave me the cakes.'

'Oh my God. Did he recognise you?'

'Yes. I was wearing the cleaner's clothes, but he knew it was me. I acted as though it was normal for me to have a cleaning job, and it seemed like he believed it.'

Hannah set the wireless up and prepared a message to transmit to London.

'Isn't it dangerous to message from within the city like this?' Lizzie asked.

'It is, but if we do it quickly, we should be alright. All we need is to arrange a pickup as soon as possible. I doubt it'll be tonight, so we'll stay here and move again tomorrow.'

Lizzie explored the small flat, marvelling at Hannah's ingenuity. How many of these safe houses did the Liberty Network have? She guessed there must be hundreds of them with the various Resistance networks sprouting up throughout France. Her thoughts moved back to the owners of the safe houses in Reims. The people who offered sanctuary to agents and those fleeing from the Nazis were courageous beyond words. They had everything to lose, but they risked it all for the greater good.

Lizzie hoped Celine wouldn't be arrested in connection with the murder. When she first approached her and they made the plan, she had asked Celine if she wanted help

to leave the city to make sure she didn't suffer retribution. Celine had lived in Paris all her life and said she wasn't going anywhere.

Lizzie returned to Hannah's side just as a response arrived. 'What do they say?'

'You won't believe it. Raven is here!'

Lizzie stared at Hannah. 'In Paris, now? But it's the worst time for him to be here. As soon as they discover the body, surely, there'll be an intensive search for his killer.'

'Yes, there's a high probability. Raven doesn't know about the major general's untimely end though, does he?'

'No, he couldn't. But it's just like him to come, although I'm surprised he got the go-ahead.'

Hannah said, 'That man has a silver tongue. He could talk anyone around to his way of thinking.'

The blood rushed to Lizzie's head and panic swirled through her body. Jack had no way of knowing what he was walking into, dropping into Paris with no warning.

'They arrested me in a random roundup the other day, and that was before you eliminated one of the top brass at German High Command. Lord knows what they'll do now for vengeance.'

'Well, there's nothing we can do now. Jack sent a location for us to meet him, and presumably he's planned a pickup to get you both out. He must think we need backup.'

Lizzie paced around the room. 'Should we leave now and warn him?'

Hannah said, 'No, it's curfew and more difficult to escape the city undetected at this time of night. If they've already found the body, it will be even riskier. Let's get some sleep and leave first thing.'

Lizzie was exhausted and after giving it some thought, she agreed Hannah's plan was a good one. She peeled off her clothes, readied herself for bed, and fell onto the hard mattress in the tiny bedroom. Hannah joined her and they pulled the thin blankets up to their chins and huddled together for warmth.

'I didn't expect to share my bed with a man.' Lizzie smiled at Hannah.

'I wish I could pull this bloody wig off, but I'd better not just in case we have any uninvited guests.'

Within three minutes, their breath slowed, and they were both asleep. Lizzie dreamt of a raven in the woods, watching over her. Always watching over her.

The next morning, Lizzie peeked through the window. 'A soldier is sticking posters on the shop windows opposite,' she called to Hannah, who was tidying herself up at the mirror, ready to leave to meet Jack.

'Can you see what they say?' Hannah asked.

'No, it's too far. It's a picture and some text.'

'They love plastering those antisemitic cartoons all over the city. The ones that blame Jews for every ill that has ever befallen the world. And now the Reich blames us for the downfall of Germany after World War I. The Jews who made up less than 1% of the population were accused of orchestrating the Treaty of Versailles. This scapegoating is nothing new, unfortunately,' Hannah said as she turned from the mirror.

‘It’s awful to see those ugly pictures and hateful messages, but I hope it is one of those and not something else.’

‘What do you mean?’

‘I’ve got a horrible feeling it might be something to do with us.’

They left the flat as they had found it, storing the radio in its hiding place. A door opened a crack on a lower floor as they trod quietly down the stairs, but no one showed their face. They kept moving. This was occupied Paris. Always someone watching and informing.

The neighbour would have seen a young couple—the French woman’s arm looped through the man’s as they walked down the stairs.

The freezing air hit Lizzie in the face as she stepped outside into the courtyard that led to the parade of shops.

‘Let’s try to get some bread from the baker’s and we can read the poster whilst we wait,’ Hannah whispered.

They crossed the courtyard, acting like a young married couple.

Lizzie took a sharp intake of breath as Hannah’s face stared back at her from the printed poster:

Wanted. Murderer and Enemy of the Reich. Reward for Information.

‘At least it’s just me they are after,’ Hannah whispered. ‘That’s what we hoped for. It means they don’t suspect you and Celine, or they’d have your faces up there too.’

‘True. I was worried about Celine. What shall we do?’

‘Stick to our plan.’

Lizzie glanced at Hannah. Her disguise as a dark-haired man with a moustache and spectacles was brilliant. No one would imagine she was the major general’s beautiful blonde secretary.

They were early enough to be amongst the baker’s first customers, and they left the shop with a delicious smelling bounty of their ration of freshly baked baguettes.

‘I’m starving, but let’s get across the city before we eat,’ Hannah said.

They retrieved their bicycles and Hannah put the bread in her basket. Lizzie’s stomach rumbled at the mouth-watering smells from the bakery.

The city was waking up and Parisians who had kept their businesses going, either by collaborating with the Nazis, or by selling what people needed in wartime, were setting up for the day. The ground was slippery, snow hadn’t fallen overnight, and the temperature was below zero. By the time they crossed town, Lizzie’s hands were blue-tinged and felt like icicles.

The military presence was heavy as more and more soldiers piled onto the streets and stuck posters of Hannah’s face on trees and buildings.

Lizzie and Hannah rested for a minute and ate a few chunks of fluffy baguette.

‘That was a good idea to choose a dark wig. You’d be more recognisable as a blond man,’ Lizzie whispered.

‘This is a disguise I’ve used during the past year. I have identity papers too, so I had

no choice but to stick with dark hair, which is just as well now I'm so famous.'

Lizzie admired Hannah's stoic attitude, but the more posters and soldiers they saw spilling onto the streets, the sicker she felt. There was a high chance they wouldn't get out of this alive, and she thought of the goodbye letter she had written to her family. She had written it before leaving on her first mission and couldn't recall exactly what she'd said. Lizzie decided that if she made it out alive, she would write a letter to replace the old one. The innocent Jersey girl who had written it, had no idea what she was facing, and if she lost her life during one of her missions, she wanted to leave a message for her parents that reflected the woman she had become fighting with the Allies, not the girl she used to be.

'I think they are locking down the city. Come, we must hurry,' Hannah said, shoving the rest of their bread into the basket. 'We can eat when we're safe. '

The Seine swelled from the chill winds on the river and the sky was an ominous grey. Summer was a distant memory, and Lizzie trembled with a combination of cold and fear as two Wehrmacht soldiers bore down on them.

'Stop right there,' snapped one, holding up a hand.

CHAPTER 39

‘Is something wrong?’ Hannah asked the soldier, who held out his hand expectantly for their papers.

Lizzie blinked as she heard a man’s voice emerge from Hannah’s throat. What a chameleon she was.

‘You tell me.’ The soldier spoke passable French with a thick German accent. ‘Do you know anything about the woman in that poster?’

Hannah shrugged her shoulders with a touch of insolence. ‘Why would I?’

‘I’m asking the questions, not you,’ the soldier replied as he shuffled their papers in his hands.

Lizzie’s heart felt like it would beat out of her body, it was strumming so fast as she watched the exchange. Hannah looked calm, and Lizzie was relieved she didn’t have to do anything but stand there like a dutiful sister.

Hannah had murdered a high-ranking Nazi and here she was, acting as cool as a cucumber. The expression was one her mother used, and it was perfect for this nail-biting situation.

Lizzie glanced around to see if they had any chance of making a run for it if needed, but there were groups of soldiers nearby. They were stopping people and asking for their papers in every direction. Lizzie breathed a little easier when she saw they

weren't the only ones being questioned. Perhaps it wasn't as bad as it seemed.

'And what about you?' The soldier turned his attention to Lizzie, whose heart pounded as his eyes fixed on hers.

'My brother gave you my papers,' Lizzie said, surprised to hear the statement glide out so effortlessly.

'Why don't you share the same family name?' The soldier kept his hard stare on Lizzie as he quizzed her.

'I'm a married woman, as you see from the papers. My brother bears my maiden name.'

The soldier nodded to himself and passed the documents back to them both.

Lizzie allowed herself to breathe again. Had they passed the checks and were free to leave now? She daredn't ask and give the soldier any ideas.

'If you see this woman in the poster, what will you do?' he asked.

Hannah replied in her gruff male voice. 'We will report her whereabouts to you. Is there anything else, sergeant? We're in a rush to get home to our sick mother.'

'Did you serve in the French army?' His voice was controlled and vaguely threatening.

Hannah pointed to her spectacles. 'I wasn't conscripted. My sight is very poor.'

The soldier appraised Hannah, his grey eyes cold. Then, after what seemed the longest time, he stood aside and indicated for them to pass. 'You'd better hurry.'

We're locking down the city in our search for the murderer.'

'Who was murdered?' Hannah asked, as if she had all the time in the world.

'You don't need to know that. Let's just say they killed the wrong man. He was the son of a close friend of Herr Himmler, and we have orders to arrest that woman and take her straight to Avenue Foch.'

When they were alone, Lizzie exhaled slowly, her breath ragged and heart still thumping manically. 'I thought I was going to faint from sheer terror!'

'Me too,' Hannah said.

'You're only trying to make me feel better. You were so composed. I've never seen anything like it!'

'Remember, I grew up with his type in Berlin. Probably went to school with a bastard like that.'

'Thank God, he believed you,' Lizzie said, still awed by Hannah's impersonation of a man.

'It's not over yet. We've got a long way to go. If he's right and they're locking down the city, we need to get out now.'

'Where is Raven?'

'I know the location. We met there a couple of times on operations before the war. It's snowing again, and it's too far to travel by bicycle. We'd better grab a car.'

'A car?' Lizzie asked, her head spinning. At moments like this, she saw how much

she still had to learn about surviving behind enemy lines.

They cycled along the riverbank until Hannah slowed and signalled for Lizzie to do the same. 'Let's leave the bicycles here,' she said, and they propped them against a fence where they were partially hidden by a bush. 'Hopefully we won't need them again, but you never know.'

Lizzie pulled her coat around her, shivering in the freezing morning mist. 'What a gloomy day,' she said.

'It might work to our advantage. They're combing the streets for blonde women and in this mist, it'll be tricky to spot them. That should slow their damn search down and, in a few hours, we'll be gone.'

'How do we get a car?' Lizzie asked .

Hannah pointed with her chin. 'See that milk truck?'

Lizzie peered around the bush and saw a grey, medium-sized truck parked on the opposite side of the road.

'We're going to borrow that. Looks like they've done their morning rounds and have parked up for the day.'

'I know nothing about trucks.'

'You keep watch. Whistle to warn me if you see someone coming before I reach the truck. Once I'm in, walk down the street, and I'll stop at the corner so you can jump in.'

Lizzie watched Hannah saunter across the road and approach the truck. No one was

paying any attention as the young Frenchman opened the truck door, fumbled about in the cabin, and fired up the engine after a couple of attempts. The big wheels edged onto the road and joined the flow of traffic.

Lizzie hurried to the corner, neck tucked inside her collar and hands deep in her coat pockets as she waited for Hannah to reach her. Soon she saw her smiling face and jumped into the seat next to her.

‘Where to, love?’ Hannah asked, winking cheekily at Lizzie, who laughed.

Hannah had stolen a truck in a few minutes, and Lizzie watched as she expertly changed the gears and turned onto the road out of Paris.

Relief coursed through her. They were on their way out of the city before it was in total lockdown. When she was back in London, she decided she would definitely take Jack up on his offer to teach her to drive properly. Sometimes a bicycle just wasn’t enough.

The milk truck wasn’t built for speed, and they bounced down the road with the empty crates crashing into each other in the back.

‘I feel sorry for the poor milkman when he discovers his truck is missing,’ Lizzie said. ‘What will he do, do you think?’

‘Hard to say, but it was this or travel all the way to the woods by bicycle. It would take too long, and we’d freeze to death before we got there.’

Hannah turned onto a back road. ‘We’ll take the slower route and avoid the road checks. Let’s hope our milkman has enough petrol to get us to the woods.’

Lizzie rested her head against the leather seat and thought of Jack as snowflakes fell

and whirled past the window. Had he made it to Paris, and would she see him today? It seemed surreal, and she didn't dare get her hopes up. Hannah told Lizzie she thought Jack would have arranged the pickup for near the woods and they might leave tonight. In the meantime, they would lie low in the cottage.

The snow was coming down fast as they weaved around the back lanes towards the woods. Lizzie was almost falling asleep to the rocking movement of the old truck, when its wheels veered off the road and they almost hurtled into a ditch.

They clambered out of the truck, and Hannah assessed the damage. 'The wheels are bogged down in the snowdrifts. We'll have to walk the rest of the way. It shouldn't be too far now.'

Lizzie gazed at the fields that were dusted in powdery snow. It was like an idyllic scene from a painting. 'How will you manage?' Suddenly, it all seemed too real. She would leave with Jack and go back to her lovely bedroom full of her belongings, but what about Hannah? It hit Lizzie that she had nothing of her own and her throat swelled, and she swallowed to stop the emotion overcoming her. 'What will you do? You don't have any of your things apart from that little satchel.'

'Don't worry about me. I'm used to living like this. I travel light for this very reason. When you're on the run, you soon realise that things aren't as important as you imagined.'

'What is important?' Lizzie asked.

Hannah looked at Lizzie. 'People. Good people are important. Things can be replaced, people can't. That's why I live like this.'

'You amaze me, Hannah. I'm going to miss you so much.'

‘Come on, let’s not get sentimental. We’ve not made it out alive yet. We’re still too close to the scene of the murder for comfort. We need to get out of sight until the plane comes for you.’

Lizzie trudged after Hannah as the snowflakes danced around them. It had been snowing on and off for weeks and the snow and ice were slippery to navigate and several times Lizzie nearly went flying. She clutched onto Hannah’s arm, and they covered the final stretch, propping each other up.

Hannah got her bearings, turning slowly around. She set out again and Lizzie followed. ‘We should see it in a minute. The cottage is in a clearing near a stream.’

‘There!’ shouted Lizzie, excitement bubbling as she spotted a curl of smoke rising against the white sky. ‘Raven has lit a fire to signal to us.’

They walked a bit further until they arrived in a clearing with an ice-covered stream, and when Lizzie turned her head, she saw a small stone cottage nestled under some trees. ‘How beautiful. We made it!’

‘We did. I haven’t been here in ages,’ Hannah said, striding towards the door. She raised her hand to knock, and a familiar deep voice echoed from behind them. ‘Stop right there.’

Jack appeared, a rifle in his hand, smiling from ear to ear.

Hannah gave a genuine shriek of delight and raced to hug Jack. ‘Here you are! I see you are as sharp as ever.’

‘No one’s approaching this cottage without me seeing them first,’ he said. He drew back and chuckled as he took in Hannah’s disguise. ‘And I see you’re still up to your old tricks, monsieur.’ His dark eyes found Lizzie’s, and he winked at her. ‘Hello,

Seagrove. Thank goodness you made it.'

He opened his arms to greet her too, and she walked into them, gripped by a wave of fierce emotion, but awkward in front of Hannah.

'Great to see you, Raven,' she said, glowing as she stared up at him.

He squeezed her tightly and released her slowly. The feel of his hands lingered on her body, and she longed to stay close to him.

'Let's get you inside out of the cold. I lit a fire.'

Jack opened the door for them both to enter the little cottage and Lizzie stared about her. 'This is like something out of Hansel and Gretel.'

'No wicked witch, though. Come in and get warm, you two. I'll bring you something to eat and you can tell me all about your exploits, and why you didn't follow your orders, Seagrove!'

CHAPTER 40

They sat next to the fire and warmed themselves whilst Jack brought them each a steaming bowl of broth. Hannah rummaged in her satchel for the baguette, and they dipped it in their bowls.

‘If you hadn’t turned up when you did, I was about to go into the city to look for you,’ Jack said, settling into a chair and lighting a cigarette.

‘I can’t believe you are here. HQ was dead against it,’ Lizzie said, careful not to mention Val by name. They were under strict orders not to reveal information about the SOE staff to members of the Resistance, and she didn’t know how much Hannah knew.

‘They were against it, but when you said Hannah had gone missing and you were staying to look for her, I convinced them it was a good idea for me to drop in for backup. And here you are perfectly fine without my intervention. I had visions of breaking into German High Command to rescue you, but the pair of you stroll in here, bold as brass. The boss said you would handle it without me. She was right.’

‘Lizzie broke into German High Command!’ Hannah said in between mouthfuls of bread and broth.

‘Did she now?’ Jack said, and Lizzie felt his eyes drilling into her as she ate, and she avoided meeting his stare. He blew smoke circles over his head and Lizzie ventured a glance at him. ‘Tell me what happened, Seagrove.’

Lizzie recounted how she'd found Philippe who connected her with a cleaner in his network, and how she'd gone in pretending to be one of the cleaning team. She gave Jack the shortened version, glossing over their exit. If she told him the details, the whole story would unravel about Karl, the Nazi officer from the train, and how she endangered them all by eating cake and allowing him to drive her to the farmhouse.

And on top of all that, if it wasn't enough to raise red flags, he turned out to be the dead major general's brother. No, she would keep that between her and Hannah. She didn't want Jack worrying about her more than he already did. In his quest to watch over her, he could use it against her in the future. She wouldn't risk having her wings clipped, even in the name of him keeping her safe.

A look of understanding passed between Lizzie and Hannah.

Jack studied Lizzie's face but didn't question her on the matter any further. 'I scoped out German High Command this morning and saw them preparing to lock down the city. Hannah, does your face adorn every shop window and noticeboard by now?'

Hannah rolled her eyes. 'Something like that.' She continued the story and told Jack how they had escaped the city in the milk truck.

'Is it hidden in case they come looking for you?' he asked.

'We skidded off the road into a snowdrift and had to abandon it on the side. It won't be long before it's covered if this heavy snowfall keeps up,' she said, looking out of the cottage window. 'I'd forgotten about this place.'

'Me too. It belongs to old friends of my parents, and I took the chance the spare key would be in the usual place. They obviously still stay here sometimes because there were some basic supplies in the cupboard.'

‘Do we have a pickup arranged?’ Lizzie asked.

‘Tomorrow. I wanted enough time to find you both, and now we don’t have a way to contact them to move it to tonight. Will you come back with us, Hannah?’ Jack asked, without missing a beat.

Hannah looked startled. ‘No, it’s kind of you to invite me, but I told Lizzie I can’t. Not until this nightmare is over.’

‘My mother called to let me know Henry has a few days’ leave coming up. It’s his first in ages and seems serendipitous with us all together like this. I can get you in with no fuss. It would mean the world to him to see you, even for a brief reunion. Won’t you reconsider?’

Hannah looked from Jack to Lizzie. ‘Let me think about it.’

‘No problem. It’ll be wheels up tomorrow night, so sleep on it.’

‘My work here isn’t finished,’ she said.

Jack’s expression was sombre. ‘I understand that. Neither is ours.’

‘How will I get back in?’

‘The same way we get in. You have my word. I’ll see to it that you return as soon as you wish. My mother will be overjoyed to see you. She never fails to ask after you, which is tricky given how I’m sworn to secrecy. You’ll be doing me an immense favour.’

Hannah’s blue eyes misted up as she looked at Jack.

‘I promise I’ll think about it. It would mean the world to me to see Henry, too. It’s been so long. Sometimes, I can’t quite picture his face.’

Lizzie was reminded once again of the tough life Hannah lived. Of course, she couldn’t carry a photo of her handsome, brave boyfriend, who flies Spitfires for the RAF.

‘It would be incredible if you came,’ Lizzie said softly. ‘We could all use a bit of a rest, even if only for a couple of days.’

Dusk had descended on the cottage and Jack stood to light a lamp. Lizzie crossed to look out the window and moved the blackout blind aside to see a gleaming white curtain of snow falling. ‘Are we safe here for the night?’ she asked, turning to Jack.

‘We should be, out here in a snowstorm, in the middle of nowhere. I imagine the Boche have their hands full with locking down the city. But I’ll keep watch and you two can turn in and catch up on some sleep. You must be exhausted after the excitement of the past few days.’

Lizzie sought Jack’s eyes in a secret signal. She wanted to convey how much she longed to be with him, but it wouldn’t do with Hannah around, so a passionate glance would have to suffice until they were back on home turf.

‘I’ll take a turn. You must be tired as well,’ she said.

‘Me too,’ Hannah said. ‘It’s only fair.’

Jack nodded. He knew there was no point trying to stop these two firecrackers from doing their bit. With either of them keeping watch, he would sleep. ‘Very well. I’ll take the first shift. Who wants the second?’

Lizzie opened her mouth to volunteer, but Hannah beat her to it. 'I'll take it.'

'Fine, then me,' Lizzie said. 'Just call me when it's my turn.'

Lizzie and Hannah took their bowls into the small kitchen, and Jack readied himself for the lookout.

Hannah washed the dishes, and Lizzie dried. Tiredness seeped into her muscles. When Hannah went upstairs, she would make tea and keep Jack company for a while. The thought of a few stolen moments alone with him instantly dissipated the weariness, and excitement buzzed through her like an electric power grid. He didn't need to come. He had risked his life for her. Again.

Hannah looked up from the sink and whispered. 'I'd better give you two some time alone.'

The words jolted Lizzie out of her trance. 'What do you mean?'

'Oh, come on, Liz. Who do you two think you are kidding? I wasn't born yesterday, you know!' Hannah grinned and Lizzie saw the mischievous glint in her blue eyes.

Lizzie's face felt hot as she returned Hannah's stare. 'I don't know what you're talking about,' she whispered. Jack mustn't hear this exchange. He'd be mortified Hannah had rumbled them so easily.

'Of course you don't. Anyway, don't worry, your secret is safe with me. If there's anyone who's an expert keeper of secrets, you're looking at her!'

Lizzie was about to deny it again, but she couldn't think what to say to convince Hannah she had misread the situation, when clearly, she hadn't.

‘Is it that obvious?’ Lizzie asked after a pause. ‘What gave us away? I thought we were being so careful.’

‘I’ve known you are in love with him since you arrived in Paris. It’s the way your eyes light up when you say his name.’

‘Oh dear,’ Lizzie said.

‘And if I hadn’t guessed then, I would have seen it today by the way he looks at you.’

Lizzie looked sheepish. ‘And we think we’re so unreadable. I hope everyone at home doesn’t know.’

‘I doubt it. Most people are far too busy thinking about their own life to pick up on such things. I read people for a living. It’s the only reason I’m still alive. Talking of which, I could kick myself for how I endangered us all by missing the signals from that bastard Hans. I should have known he was onto me.’

‘Don’t beat yourself up over that. You salvaged the situation, and he got what he deserved.’ Lizzie squeezed Hannah’s shoulder. ‘When I grow up, I want to be like you.’

Hannah hugged Lizzie, and they stood there for a rare moment of silent camaraderie. When they drew apart, Hannah whispered, ‘Now go and make the most of your time together. I’ll be upstairs. You are two of my favourite people and you deserve every second of happiness you can snatch in this insane world.’

Lizzie left the kitchen and went in search of Jack.

CHAPTER 41

Jack entered the cottage, his coat speckled in snowflakes. His eyes lit up when he saw Lizzie walking towards him.

‘All well outside?’ she asked.

‘Nothing to report except I’ve missed you so much,’ he said, his deep voice gravelly.

‘I’ve missed you too.’ Nerves danced in her stomach as the distance between them closed and he was near enough to touch and towered above her.

He shrugged out of the big coat and hung it to dry near the crackling fire.

‘Nice coat,’ she said.

‘They kitted me out before I left. Just as well with this freezing weather.’ He reached for her and pulled her nearer to the fire as he threaded his fingers through hers. ‘My Seagrove,’ he murmured. ‘Let’s sit here and get warm.’

The touch of his flesh scorched her skin, and she yearned to feel his muscular arms around her. A surge of love swelled in her heart as she looked at him. The love she felt for him was at once breathtaking and terrifying. They could lose each other in one miscalculated move, and the thought was never far away. Each moment together could be their last. She thought about Hannah’s advice and realised she was right. There wasn’t a moment to waste.

Their fingers were still intertwined, and she sank onto his lap in the chair by the fire. Jack enveloped her in his arms, and his lips joined hers, first gently and then urgently. Lizzie quivered and every cell in her body cried out for him. They clung to each other, and the world disappeared as their tongues touched and reignited the fire that had blazed between them since their first kiss had turned their lives upside down.

Before the war, Lizzie was a naive young woman, expecting to marry soon, settle down and have a family like her mother. If someone had a crystal ball and told her she would move to London, fall in love with an intelligence officer and be an undercover Special Operations Executive agent in occupied France, she would have thought they were spinning her a yarn. How was a life like that possible? And how was a love like that real?

Jack's breathing was laboured, and his need was pronounced as she shifted on his knee. He slipped his fingers into the bodice of her dress, caressing her until she ached with desire at the feel of his firm hands on her sensitive skin.

'Are we alone?' he whispered; his breathing growing more ragged by the second.

'Yes, Hannah's gone upstairs. She said she will be down later for her shift.' There was no need to tell him now that Hannah had guessed about their relationship. Even if she returned to London with them, it would only be for a short while.

'That's tempting,' he said, 'but I should keep watch.'

'You should,' she teased, melting into his hard body, and they lost control, as their passion reached fever pitch .

Lizzie undid her buttons and slipped her dress off one shoulder, tilting her head alluringly. She was about to remove the dress when a loud boom echoed around the room, and they both froze.

‘What’s that?’ she said.

‘I don’t know.’ He kissed her gently, untangled himself, and moved her off his lap into the chair.

The loss was like the warmth of the sun vanishing behind a cloud, and the disappointment showed on her face.

Jack stroked her cheek. ‘It’s my job to protect you, not ravish you. It’s probably nothing, but I’d better check.’ He reached for his Sten machine gun.

Lizzie straightened her dress and picked up her gun from the table.

Jack put his finger to his lips and signalled Lizzie to move to the side of the front door. He walked stealth-like towards the kitchen, and she heard the back door open as he stepped outside.

Lizzie heard footsteps, and Hannah appeared at the bottom of the stairs. ‘What’s going on?’ she asked, her voice groggy.

‘Not sure. We heard a loud noise and Jack’s gone outside to check.’

Hannah, still dressed in her man’s trousers and shirt, extracted a knife and disappeared out of the back door after Jack.

Lizzie stayed near the front door, heart pumping and gun in her hand, ready to spring into action. She strained her ears for unusual sounds, but she wasn’t used to living in the heart of the woods. Lizzie had spent most of her life at Seagrove and grew up listening to the hypnotic rhythm of the tides. In London, she’d grown accustomed to the bustle of city life and the sounds of the daily Blitz. Here, all the noises were unfamiliar, like the distant wails and screeches of wild animals.

There was another bang, and Lizzie jumped. Her fingers tightened on the gun, and she stood there waiting to see what happened next, wondering if she should go outside too, but she decided it was better to stay out of sight. There were two of them out there already. She would be the armed agent who could take someone by surprise.

After what seemed an age, the back door opened, and she heard footsteps. Hannah and Jack entered the room and Lizzie looked at them, her eyes full of questions. 'Well?' she said.

'False alarm. The animals run riot here at night. Looks like one of them banged into the wooden shed at the back of the property and sent a bucket flying. They were probably searching for food. We've checked the perimeter and there's no sign of anyone.'

Lizzie exhaled and placed her gun on the table. 'That's a relief. I was worried someone had reported the abandoned milk truck, and they'd come to search for us.'

'Like I said earlier, it'll be covered in snow after today's storm, but it's stopped falling and is melting now, so it's just as well we're getting out of here tomorrow,' Hannah said.

Jack and Hannah were freezing after their nighttime surveillance, and Lizzie made them some tea and they all huddled around the embers of the fire. Hannah threw some more logs on, and the flames crackled back to life, warming their faces.

Lizzie drank her tea, relieved the threat was over, and listened to Jack and Hannah reminisce about when Hannah first met Henry. Lizzie said, 'Henry sounds wonderful. I hope I get to meet him when he's on leave.'

'I'll make sure you do,' Jack said. 'The four of us can go out to dinner. Wouldn't that be fun? '

‘I can’t even remember the last time I went out to dinner,’ Hannah said.

Lizzie reached over and squeezed Hannah’s shoulder. ‘All the more reason to come back with us tomorrow. The change of scene will do you good. Going out to dinner, the four of us, sounds amazing, doesn’t it?’

Hannah nodded. ‘It does, but I suppose I’m afraid of not wanting to come back here after being in London and finally seeing Henry again.’

‘If you don’t want to come back, you don’t have to. My mother dreams of you two getting married. She’d jump at the chance of arranging it for you,’ Jack said.

‘It wouldn’t feel right when they need our help here,’ Hannah said.

‘You would still help. HQ would snap you up in a heartbeat. You’d be invaluable in London and possibly have an even greater impact. We’re scaling operations in France. Imagine how many agents could benefit from your unique expertise.’

Hannah looked wistful. ‘It is tempting, but I can’t imagine living a normal life.’

Lizzie interjected. ‘Oh, trust me, it’s far from a normal life when you work at the SOE.’

Hannah said she appreciated the offer, and she’d give them an answer in the morning. ‘I won’t be able to fall asleep again now. You two get some rest. I’ll whistle if I need backup.’

Lizzie went upstairs and Jack followed.

CHAPTER 42

Lizzie opened her eyes as light trickled through the blinds. Jack's arm lay across her stomach, and she was snuggled into his warm body.

This. This was what she had missed. The closeness of him next to her in bed. Knowing she could reach out and touch him anytime, which she did now.

He stirred and opened his eyes. 'Seagrove,' he said, his voice husky.

'Raven,' she whispered. 'How did you sleep?'

'Like a baby. You?'

Lizzie purred, 'I haven't slept that well since I arrived in Paris.'

'Me neither! And today is the day we're going home. I can't tell you how much I missed you. I've never missed anyone in my whole life like I miss you when you go away. It's as if there's a gaping hole in my heart and I can't function properly. Sounds sappy, but it's true.'

Lizzie beamed at Jack's effusive words of love and ran her fingers over the dark stubble on his chin. 'I feel the same, but you put it so much more eloquently than I ever could. It's not at all sappy. It's lovely.'

Jack lifted her on top of him in one fluid movement. His lips claimed hers and soon they were lost in each other again and forgot all about sleep.

Lizzie's brunette locks tickled his skin as she propped her head on his chest and they lay in bed, not wanting their time alone to end.

'I'd better go before Hannah twigs what we're up to,' he said after a while, climbing out of bed and pulling on his trousers.

'I don't think you need to worry about that. She knows.'

Jack's dark eyebrow shot up as he studied her face. 'Knows what?'

'Knows about us.'

'You told her?'

'No, I didn't have to. She said she guessed from how I talked about you, and how you look at me.'

'It was difficult to contain my excitement at seeing you yesterday, but I thought I did a stellar job. So much for being a master of intelligence.'

'Me too,' Lizzie laughed.

'It's lucky everyone isn't as astute as her or they'd all be on to us back home.'

The day crawled by as they waited for evening. They passed the time by going to find the milk truck and sure enough, Hannah was correct. The grey truck was visible now the snow had melted, and one wheel was stuck in a rut at the side of the lane where they'd left it in a snowdrift.

Jack jumped in and tried to start it, but the engine coughed, spluttered to life for a few seconds, and then petered out.

‘Shall we push you?’ Lizzie asked.

Jack turned the ignition again, and the girls pushed. They got some traction, and the truck lurched forward, but then its wheels spun in the thick sludge, and it slid back into the rut. They tried again and again, once with Hannah in the truck and Jack pushing, but it just wouldn’t budge.

‘It’s no good. We’ll have to leave it and hope no patrols spot it before tonight.’

At the cottage, Jack warmed up the rest of the broth and they sat at the table as night fell, thick and heavy. They took it in turns to keep watch, with Jack striding out to the edge of the woods now and then.

‘Thank goodness the snowstorm stopped, or we might have been stuck here for days. It’s tricky enough landing in woodland, never mind in thick snow.’

‘Have you decided what to do? It’s almost time,’ Jack told Hannah when he joined her where she stood alone in front of the cottage.

‘That’s a Wolf Moon,’ Hannah said, pointing to the sky.

Jack gazed up at the glowing yellow moon that hung like a giant chunk of yellow cheese amidst the tiny twinkling stars. ‘It is such a beautiful night,’ Jack said. ‘A great night for the pickup. Just as well I didn’t arrange it for yesterday.’

The snow-covered branches on the trees glittered in the moonlight like Christmas decorations and his warm breath misted in the cold air.

‘Did you make up your mind?’ he asked after they stood in silence, soaking up the picture-perfect scene.

She turned to him. 'Yes, I'm coming with you. It would be stupid not to see Henry when he's on leave. Who knows when we'll get the chance again?'

Jack released a quiet whoop and looked at his watch. 'That's the best news. Let's go in and tell Lizzie. The plane should be here soon.'

They went and gathered their few belongings and prepared to leave. The pickup was in a clearing near the edge of the woods, so they had to trudge over snowy ground, and it was slow going.

Lizzie whispered. 'It's a stunning night but gosh, it's cold. My nose feels like an icicle!'

'We're nearly there,' Jack said. 'Not long now.'

'How will they see where to land in the woods?' asked Lizzie.

'We used this spot before,' Hannah said. 'There's a windmill that serves as a landmark, as I recall.'

'That's right,' Jack said, bending to move some fallen branches, laden with snow, out of their path.

A short while later, he halted. 'There it is, on the hill ahead. See it?'

Lizzie saw the pretty windmill illuminated by the light of the moon.

They entered the clearing, and Jack checked his watch again. 'Should be here in the next five or ten minutes.' He produced three torches from his pockets and gave the girls one each, ready to shine, when they heard the plane approaching.

‘That is the perfect safe house,’ Lizzie said. ‘There’s no one within miles to see us, especially during a snowstorm.’ She kept her next thoughts to herself, but the night they spent together in the little cottage in the snowy woods was one of the most romantic she could imagine. Sometimes things just worked out better than you could ever predict. One day she was sleeping in the basement in a spooky farmhouse, terrified the Gestapo would bang on the door, and soon after she was wrapped in Jack’s arms.

‘I think that’s the plane,’ Hannah said, cocking her head to one side as she listened.

‘Yes, that sounds like it in the distance,’ Jack agreed, switching on his torch.

The others followed suit, and they formed a signalling pattern for the pilot to see where to land. Hannah moved to one side and Lizzie and Jack spaced out for the torch beams. The sound of the engine grew louder, and Jack caught Lizzie’s hand in his and raised it to his lips, planting a kiss on her cold skin. ‘We’ll be home soon, darling.’

Lizzie blew him a kiss and joy surged through her. Soon she would see her family and Hannah was coming with them, too. What fun they would have together in London, dancing away the heaviness of war for a few hours. Another successful mission was complete, and she was profoundly grateful.

The plane’s engine whirred, and they stepped back as the small aircraft landed bumpily on the uneven ground. Lizzie felt Jack’s hand on the small of her back, gently guiding her towards the Lysander. She boarded, smiling at the navigator, who welcomed her.

Lizzie took a seat and was settling in for the journey home when she heard a loud cracking noise. The navigator turned and looked out the hatch.

‘The bloody Boche have arrived,’ he hissed, reaching for his gun, and Lizzie pulled hers out of her pocket.

She peered outside to see Jack half carrying, half dragging Hannah to the plane, as a gunshot whistled past their heads. ‘Wheels up,’ he gasped as he hauled Hannah inside with Lizzie’s help.

A barrage of bullets flew past the hatch, and one hit the fuselage with a high-pitched whine. Lizzie and the navigator fired at the lights of the vehicle on the edge of the snowy clearing.

‘I can only see one truck. Did we get them?’ Lizzie asked.

The navigator fired again. ‘I don’t know, but there will be more on the way.’

Hannah leaned heavily on Jack like a drunken sailor. There was blood on her arm, spreading over her man’s coat sleeve.

‘My God, she’s badly wounded,’ Lizzie said.

The hatch closed and Jack sank onto the floor of the plane on his knees, panting as he propped Hannah up on the seat, her head sagging against the side. ‘Get out now!’ he shouted to the pilot.

The small plane was already off the ground and shots pinged and bounced off one wing as they heard loud voices. Jack peered out of the window as trucks screeched into the clearing and soldiers stared up at the escaping plane.

‘That was close. A few minutes later, they’d have caught us. Fire on them again,’ Jack ordered the navigator, who was now in the cockpit.

‘This will buy us a few minutes,’ the navigator shouted, and a fierce round of gunfire ripped into the ground near the cluster of Germans, as the plane rose shakily into the sky. They gained height and soon they were out of the range of fire.

‘Hell! That was too blooming close,’ Lizzie said, breathing again, her heart slamming against her chest.

‘Nice job!’ Jack shouted. ‘Where’s the first aid kit?’

The navigator brought it to him, and Jack signalled for Lizzie to help him pull off Hannah’s coat.

‘Ow,’ Hannah said. Her lips were dry and her skin pale and clammy.

‘She’s in pain. Can we give her something?’ Lizzie asked.

Jack rummaged through the kit. ‘Here’s some morphine,’ he said. ‘This should do the trick until we get her home.’

Hannah swallowed the vial of morphine and closed her eyes with a sigh.

Lizzie brought her a cushion for her head and Jack examined her arm. ‘It’s still bleeding, so we must stop the flow. We’ll have to get her to a hospital.’

Jack cleaned and bound the wound with Lizzie’s help as the plane swooped through the moonlit skies of occupied France and scrambled for home over the choppy English Channel. When Hannah drifted off, Lizzie looked out of the window and saw the chalky glow of the White Cliffs of Dover. She remembered how moved she had been when she first saw the cliffs and knew she was almost home.

Jack said, ‘Someone must have reported seeing the milk truck. The entire city was

locked down searching for Hannah, don't forget. They put two and two together and searched the area.'

'I was so sure we were all alone,' Lizzie said, shaking her head. 'You never know what to expect, do you?'

'We were lucky the Jerries only arrived at the last moment. Never let your guard down. The minute you think you're safe is the minute you're most vulnerable.'

'Poor Hannah. We convinced her to come with us, thinking she'd be safer!'

'Don't worry. We'll get her patched up,' Jack said. 'If she'd stayed there, the chances are they would have caught her.'

CHAPTER 43

The turbulence was fierce as the plane descended, ready to land at the airfield. Lizzie held onto Hannah, who had fallen into a troubled sleep and was thrashing about.

‘This is it,’ said Jack, and Lizzie felt the wheels touch down and her stomach lurched as the plane bumped along before it slowed and skidded to a stop on the icy ground.

The navigator opened the door. ‘Welcome back to Blighty,’ he said, saluting, a wide smile on his rugged face.

‘Thank you,’ Jack and Lizzie chorused.

‘I’ll see if there’s a medic on hand.’ Jack jumped from the aircraft, and Lizzie stayed with Hannah. There was fresh bright blood on the dressing they’d used to bind her wound, and Lizzie was worried.

There was a screech of brakes and a minute later Val poked her face through the hatch and called cheerfully, ‘Welcome home, Seagrove. Oh, who have we here? And where’s Jack?’

Lizzie told Val how they had made it out in the nick of time, and Hannah had been wounded .

‘So, this is the legendary Hannah... Why is she wearing men’s clothes?’

‘Long story,’ Lizzie said.

‘Well, I’ll look forward to the debrief. They’re always fascinating with you!’ Val climbed aboard and looked at Hannah’s arm. ‘She’ll live,’ she said and went off in search of Jack.

Hannah was carried off the plane on a stretcher and was soon receiving emergency treatment in a hut they used for injured pilots. The verdict was she would indeed live, but she needed stitches at the hospital.

‘You’re very lucky. It could have been a lot worse,’ the medic said as Hannah winced when he cleaned her wound.

When they were alone, Lizzie asked Hannah how she was feeling.

‘A gunshot wound is a small price to pay to see Henry,’ Hannah muttered, her voice groggy.

‘You might not say that when the morphine wears off!’ Lizzie laughed.

Lizzie slipped outside and found Jack drinking tea with Val in another hut.

‘The medic said her arm will be sore for a while, but there shouldn’t be any lasting damage,’ Jack said.

‘What a relief. I feel personally responsible for urging her to come back with us,’ Lizzie replied.

Val patted Lizzie’s shoulder and went to organise mugs of tea for her and Hannah.

‘Now you know how I feel when my agents are in the field,’ Jack said. ‘It’s hell.’

‘So, I’m just another agent, am I?’ Lizzie asked coyly, tilting her head to one side.

‘Let’s just say it’s one hundred times—no, one thousand times worse when it’s you. In fact, let’s say you’re grounded indefinitely and be done with it. ’

They were alone, and Jack pulled Lizzie into his arms, and she nestled her head against his shoulder. ‘Welcome back to England’s green and pleasant land, my darling. I can’t tell you how relieved I am to have you home safely.’

They heard footsteps and jumped apart guiltily in time for Val to enter and hand Lizzie an enamel mug of steaming tea. ‘You’ll be pleased to know, sleeping beauty is sitting up and drinking tea. I’ve made arrangements to move her by ambulance. I daresay she could make it by car, but she’s certainly earned a ride to London in style.’

After another round of hot, sweet tea, Val fired up the Austin, and they piled in. Lizzie sat in the back and Jack and Val talked about the mission, and their voices lulled Lizzie into a deep sleep. Her head lolled against the seat, and she slept all the way to London. Her last thought was it was good to be back on English soil with Jack.

Hannah spent the night in hospital and was released the following afternoon.

Lizzie had her first driving lesson with Jack on their way to collect Hannah. ‘When Hannah stole the milk truck and drove us to the woods, I realised how critical it is to be a competent driver. It made me more determined to get used to driving,’ Lizzie said, her brow furrowed as she concentrated on the road.

‘Shall I see if we have an old milk truck knocking about for you to practice on? Failing that, we could get you a part-time job on a morning milk round before you come into the office,’ Jack said, his tone serious but his eyes gleeful.

Lizzie stopped at the traffic lights and turned to face him. ‘I think I’ll manage, thank you!’ she said, rolling her eyes but smiling at his teasing.

When they arrived, Hannah said, 'I can't believe I spent my first night in London in the hospital. All that time in the Resistance and I've not even been to a doctor.'

'How are you feeling?' Lizzie asked.

'I'm fine. A bit sore, but the doctor said it'll soon pass.'

'That's what the medic said yesterday, so that's great news.'

'Is there someone you'd like to see?' Jack asked.

Hannah's eyes lit up, and she looked around. 'Is Henry here?'

'Not yet, but he's on his way to London. We're taking you for tea at St. Ermin's Hotel and he'll meet us there shortly.'

Hannah's blonde hair was tangled, and her man's wig lay discarded on a chair. 'I must look dreadful. It's not exactly how I envisioned reuniting with my fiancé. I need to change out of this gown and at least wash my face.'

Lizzie helped Hannah out of bed, and they went to tidy her up. When they returned, her hair was rolled and gripped, and she was dressed.

'We should have brought her a new outfit,' Lizzie said to Jack.

There was blood on Hannah's sleeve. She looked far from her best with her injured arm and bruised face.

'I'll telephone Baker Street and get them to organise her some temporary clothes until we can kit her out properly,' Jack said.

‘I won’t be here long,’ Hannah reminded them.

‘Yes, I haven’t forgotten. You need to be here at least a few days for your arm to heal, so you’ll need some clothes,’ he replied.

Lizzie and Jack had been debriefed that morning and Val had given them both leave. ‘Take a few days off. That’s an order,’ she said, holding one hand up before they could interject. ‘Show Hannah a good time. I understand your brother is on his way home?’

Jack offered Lizzie a cigarette, and she refused. ‘I’ve decided I only smoke undercover.’

‘Smart girl. It’s a dreadful habit,’ Val said pointedly, looking at Jack.

He inhaled and sat back in his chair. ‘Yes, Henry is on his way to London now.’

‘Very well, I’ll see you both in a couple of days. You’re under strict orders to enjoy yourselves and stay out of trouble.’

Jack and Lizzie left Baker Street together to collect Hannah, who was waiting for them, eager to escape her confinement.

Lizzie drove again, with Jack in the passenger seat directing her when she wasn’t sure where to turn. The car crossed Westminster Bridge and Hannah admired the famous landmarks.

‘It’s amazing to be back,’ Hannah said as they passed Big Ben, the Palace of Westminster, and Westminster Abbey, before pulling up in front of an impressive-looking hotel.

‘The SOE was based at St. Ermin’s when I joined,’ Lizzie said.

‘In a hotel? How ingenious,’ Hannah said. ‘No one would suspect that.’

‘We can tell you now, without having to kill you,’ Jack laughed.

‘Of course, so I’m guessing I won’t be allowed access to your offices.’

‘Val, who you met at the airfield, wants to see you before you leave, but she’ll meet you here, I imagine.’

‘Fair enough. You wouldn’t want me divulging your HQ location if the Gestapo get hold of me.’

‘Let’s forget about all that for today. I’ve got a surprise for you girls,’ Jack said. I booked us a table in the grand ballroom for this evening, so it’s dinner and dancing for the four of us. And you and Henry can sleep here tonight before you visit my mother who will no doubt be pacing the floor the minute she knows you’re both here. I haven’t told her you’ve arrived yet for that very reason.’

As they entered the lobby of the iconic hotel, a tall, handsome young man dressed in RAF uniform, who looked like Jack, leapt from his seat and strode towards them. His eyes scanned the three of them and lit on Hannah. She rushed towards him and he towards her.

Lizzie felt a lump in her throat as she watched them meet in the middle and reach for each other. Hannah moved into Henry’s arms, and they clung together. Tears spilled from Hannah’s eyes. Lizzie had never seen the fierce Resistance leader so vulnerable, and tears rolled down Lizzie’s face. She glanced at Jack, who stood next to her, and she saw him swipe at his eyes with his sleeve.

Jack slapped his brother on the shoulder and said, 'We'll make ourselves scarce and leave you two to catch up. We'll see you at seven for dinner.'

Lizzie waved to Hannah, who was so deeply engrossed in Henry, she didn't notice. 'Well, I don't think we're needed here until later.' Lizzie turned to exit the lobby, but Jack caught her hand.

'Remember, we're under strict orders to relax and enjoy ourselves?'

'Was that what Val said?' Lizzie asked, beaming up at Jack, joy rushing through her at the thought of spending time with him and not having to worry the Gestapo would bang on her door at any minute.

'Whatever she said, we're not needed at Baker Street tonight, so when I booked Henry and Hannah's suite, I took the liberty of booking us one, too.' He extracted a large key from his pocket and waved it in front of her. 'You're all mine today, Seagrove. Tomorrow, I'll return you safe and sound to your family. I imagine they won't let you out of their sight for a few days.'

Lizzie squealed in delight. 'What a wonderful surprise, darling. How thoughtful of you.'

'The elevator is still out of action,' Jack said when they crossed the lobby. 'We'll have to take the stairs. All the engineers have been conscripted. We'll be lucky if we have a working piece of equipment in the whole of London if this war doesn't end soon.'

Lizzie stood at the bottom of the staircase. 'Race you!' she shouted and ran up the first flight of stairs before Jack could catch her. She heard him thundering on her heels, and then his hand grabbed her shoulder and spun her around as they reached the second-floor landing.

‘Oh no, you don’t!’ he said, pulling her into his arms. She exhaled happily as she sunk into his embrace, and they leant against the wall, laughing and catching their breath.

They were home.

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Over dinner, Jack couldn't take his eyes off Lizzie, and they sat shoulder to shoulder, wedged next to each other at the table they shared with Henry and Hannah.

Every second Lizzie was away from him was torture. He smiled at his sentimental thoughts, but it was all true. Jack had never imagined feeling like this about anyone, but Lizzie had captured his heart in the most extraordinary way.

As soon as this war was over, he would ask her to marry him and take her on the most spectacular honeymoon to all their favourite places in France.

He didn't hide their relationship from his brother. What was the point when Hannah knew the truth? Jack didn't have the heart to hide his feelings from Henry. Life was too short. He enjoyed the moment and revelled in their good fortune at them each having the woman of their dreams at their side.

Henry was overjoyed for Jack. 'I can't tell you how good it is to see you in love. We thought you'd never find the right one!'

Jack laughed. 'I confess I thought the same. '

'Does Maman know?'

Jack said, 'Not yet. I've wanted to tell her, but we must keep our relationship secret at work, so it's simpler to keep it between us for now. You'll be back in the sky soon, so you're an exception. Keep it under your hat.'

Henry promised Jack's secret would remain between them. 'We can have a double

wedding when this damned war is over.'

'Sounds perfect, little brother,' Jack said, patting Henry's shoulder.

After dinner, Jack made a toast. 'Here's to winning the war and to all of us being reunited again soon.'

They chinked their glasses, and the band played a popular Swing song, prompting Jack to offer his hand to Lizzie. Henry followed suit with Hannah and soon they were all on the busy dance floor.

Jack delighted Lizzie with his thoughtfulness. Amid the chaos of returning from the operation in occupied France, with his brother on leave, and Hannah in London, he still somehow planned a perfect magical evening for the four of them. Lizzie had never felt more blessed, and the evening passed in a flurry of drinks, dancing, and laughter.

Hannah winked at Lizzie as they crossed paths, and Lizzie winked back. They were both in love with a King brother and the happiness showed on their faces for all to see. Henry held Hannah tenderly as they swayed together, carefully keeping her sore arm away from the other dancers.

Seeing Hannah and Henry so in love was like a balm for Lizzie's soul after the terror of their recent days in Paris. Her mind flickered back to the moment she shone the torch into the cupboard at German High Command. Thank God she hadn't found Hannah there. It would have been a very different ending to their story.

When Lizzie could barely keep her eyes open any longer, they said goodnight to the lovebirds and Jack led her upstairs. They climbed into bed in the luxurious suite and fell fast asleep in each other's arms without stirring until morning.

The following evening, Lizzie arrived home at the Regent's Park house to a

cacophony of gleeful welcomes from her mother and sisters.

‘Why didn’t you warn us you were coming?’ Rose asked. ‘I would have organised a celebration dinner.’

Lizzie hugged her mother and assured her she was thrilled to be home for whatever dinner was on the menu.

‘I’m relieved to see you,’ said Rose, dabbing her shiny eyes with a handkerchief and clearing her throat. ‘I was so worried.’

‘Did you get my postcards?’ Lizzie asked.

Rose strode to the mantelpiece and pointed to two pretty pictures of Henley-on-Thames propped against the mirror.

‘Oh, I’m pleased.’

‘Will you be returning to the nursing home?’

‘I’m not sure yet, Ma, but I’m home for a while, anyway. I’ll work in London as usual until my next posting, whenever and wherever that may be. It may well be back to Henley, but I don’t know.’

‘You’re as thin as a matchstick. You’d think they’d have fed you some decent meals in a nursing home. Weren’t you eating?’

‘There were decent meals, and I ate, but I suppose I’ve been doing a lot of running around,’ Lizzie said, trying to make light of how much weight she’d lost.

Lizzie hugged her sisters, Juliet and Evie, and turned to her father as he entered the room.

‘There she is,’ he said. ‘The wanderer returns. How good to see you darling Lizzie.’

‘It’s good to see you too, Pa. I’ve missed you all so much.’

‘We have a wonderful surprise for you,’ Rose said after dinner, and she left the table and returned flapping a piece of paper that she handed to an intrigued Lizzie.

‘What is this?’ Lizzie turned it over in her hands like a clue from one of her missions. She peered at the handwriting. ‘It’s from Nan!’ she exclaimed, rustling the paper.

The family had sent a note via the Red Cross Message Service shortly after Christmas and had been waiting anxiously for a reply.

Lizzie read her grandmother’s words aloud, which were written on the reverse of the form:

Dearest Reginald,

We were so happy to hear from you. Miss you all terribly. We are well. Take care.

Love to everyone,

Nan & Pops

Tears streamed from Lizzie’s eyes as she raised her head. ‘Oh, thank God. They are alive and well!’

There wasn’t a dry eye around the table as Reginald explained how the message had been forwarded from the Red Cross and arrived on his desk at the War Office. ‘You’re only allowed to write twenty-five words, you know! ’

‘I wondered why it was so short,’ Lizzie said. ‘Not like Nan, at all!’

After dinner, Reginald knocked on Lizzie's bedroom door and entered her room, overlooking the snowy park. The blizzards seemed to have followed them from Paris, and Lizzie pulled on an extra cardigan.

'How was it, Lizzie?' her father asked, his eyes sombre. 'Was the mission, whatever it was, a success? I know you can't tell me the details.'

Lizzie nodded. 'Yes, it was, Pa. I'm so happy to be home, but we did good work.'

'I'm proud of you, my love.'

Apart from Reginald, the rest of the family believed she was a translator in a government office on Baker Street. Lizzie told them her work was all very dull, and fortunately, they believed her. Loose tongues cost lives and even one's family and dearest friends couldn't be trusted not to say the wrong thing when so much was at stake.

They had convinced Hannah to stay on for a week to recuperate and she and Henry spent a relaxing couple of days at the King family home, which delighted Jack's mother, Nicole. Henry had already returned to his base a few days earlier, and after a tearful lover's parting, Hannah was eager to get back into action.

It was a bright, freezing morning and Lizzie and Jack walked hand in hand through Regent's Park, picking their way around the clumpy remnants of the previous evening's ice and snow. When Lizzie said her lips were chapped from the chill winds, Jack told her this winter was one of the coldest in years.

They had fallen into a daily routine of Jack waiting for her in the park so they could spend some time together before work. Lizzie had said it was out of his way, but he insisted, and now they both looked forward to seeing each other every morning before the SOE gobbled up the day.

Lizzie pointed towards the sky. 'I know they are there to protect us from enemy aircraft, but goodness, they are ugly.'

Jack agreed the large, silver barrage balloons floating high over the park were an eyesore, but said he was grateful for them.

Several bombs had exploded in the park recently and what had been a tranquil oasis in London before the Blitz was now littered with rubble, and steel cables supported the anti-aircraft installations.

'It's just as well it's freezing,' Lizzie said as they neared the gate.

'Why's that?' Jack asked.

'No one will ever recognise us in all this paraphernalia! It's my best disguise yet.'

Jack laughed, and they held onto each other, so they didn't slip on the icy tufts of grass. They both wore heavy coats and winter hats, and thick scarves partially covered their faces.

'Come here!' Jack said, pulling Lizzie into his arms and planting a kiss on her cold nose. 'That's all I can see of you.' They stood holding each other, knowing the inevitable moment for them to part had arrived. 'Will you come to the flat tonight?'

'Of course,' Lizzie said. 'I'll see you around seven. Make sure you are home!'

Jack had a habit of losing track of time when he was working.

'How could I not when I know you're coming?' Jack kissed her again, and they parted reluctantly, each taking a different route to Baker Street.

Jack entered the SOE building three minutes before Lizzie. This was how it had to be

for now. Seagrove and Raven lived secret lives, but they both agreed that as long as they had each other, all was well in their world.