

CITY OF SPIES

Mara Timon is a native New Yorker and self-proclaimed citizen of the world who began a love affair with London about 20 years ago. She started writing short stories as a teenager, and when a programme on the BBC caught her interest, she followed the “what ifs” until a novel began to appear. Mara lives in London and is working on her next book. She loves reading, writing, running, Pilates, red wine, and spending time with friends and family – not necessarily in that order.

MARA TIMON

**CITY
OF
SPIES**

ZAFFRE

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*For my parents, without whose love and support I would
not be where I am now. I could not have asked for better,
and miss them every day.*

Character List

* = real name, verified via print or online resources

~ = fictional characters in other novels

France

Pierre Alaunt: A Resistance fighter

Jean-Roger Demarque: A Parisian neighbour of Elisabeth's

Antoine Gamay: A French fisherman

Köhler: ("the grey-haired man") A German secret service operative

Franc and Christiane Laronde: Relatives of Madame Renard with links to the Resistance near Rouen

Elisabeth de Mornay: (codename Cécile, aliases include Nathalie Lafontaine, Solange Verin, and Veronica Sinclair) An agent within Special Operations Executive

~**Edith Renard:** A friend of Elisabeth's, with links to the Resistance in Paris

Alexander "Alex" Sinclair: A Mosquito pilot from the 105 Squadron

Michel, Armand, and Mireille: Resistance fighters

Portugal

Rupert Allen-Smythe: A diplomat within the British Embassy

* **John Grosvenor Beevor:** Former SOE station head in Lisbon

* **Hans Bendixen:** Kapitän, head of the Abwehr's Naval Intelligence in Lisbon

Alois Bergmann: A German assassin

Martin and Rosalie Billiot: French nationals living in Estoril, Portugal

* **António de Oliveira Salazar:** Prime Minister of Portugal from 1932 to 1968

Adriano de Rios Vilar: A lieutenant within the *Polícia de Vigilância e de Defesa do Estado* (PVDE), Portugal's Surveillance and State Defense Police.

Claudine and Christophe Deschamps: French nationals living in Estoril, Portugal

Sabela Figueiredo: Elisabeth's housekeeper

Eduard Graf: Formerly of the 7 Panzer division, now a Major in the Abwehr (the German military intelligence service)

Matthew Harrington: A diplomat within the British Embassy and godfather to Elisabeth

Count Javier: A Spanish count living in Estoril, Portugal with his wife Laura

Hubert "Bertie" Jones: (Code name "Ulyse", aliases include Pete Aldridge) A Special Operations Executive agent shipwrecked in Portugal

Betty Jury and Nicola Langston: Secretaries at the British Embassy

* **Agostinho Lourenço:** ("The Director") Captain of the *Polícia de Vigilância e de Defesa do Estado* (PVDE), Portugal's Surveillance and State Defense Police

Andreas Neumann: Leutnant, formerly of the 7 Panzer division, now a lieutenant in the Abwehr (the German military intelligence service), and adjutant to Eduard Graf

Pires: A Portuguese man selling information to the Germans

Julian Reilly: An Irish novelist living near Estoril, Portugal

Gabrielle Ribaud: A French national living in Estoril, Portugal

* **Amália Rodrigues:** A Portuguese fado singer

Major Haydn Schüller: An SS officer based in Lisbon

* **Baron Oswald von Hoyningen-Huene:** German Ambassador to Portugal from 1934–1944

Mrs Willoughby: Bertie Jones' housekeeper

Great Britain

* **Vera Atkins:** Assistant to section head Colonel Maurice Buckmaster, and his de facto second in command, responsible for the recruitment and deployment of British agents in occupied France

* **Colonel Maurice Buckmaster:** (“Buck”) Leader of the French section of Special Operations Executive

~**Kathryn “Kat” Christie:** A friend of Elisabeth de Mornay

~**Big André**, ~**Jérôme**, ~**Dominique**, and ~**Robert:** Code names for Special Operations Executive agents that Elisabeth trained with

Other Persons of note:

* **Pietro Badoglio:** Marshal, an Italian general who became Prime Minister after the Italian Council voted to depose Benito Mussolini

* **Ronald Campbell:** The British Ambassador in Lisbon

* **Wilhelm Franz Canaris:** German admiral and chief of the Abwehr, the German military intelligence service from 1935 to 1944

* **Leslie Howard:** An English film actor/movie star. He was actively anti-German and rumoured to be involved in British Intelligence. Returning from a trip to Lisbon, his plane was shot down by the Luftwaffe over the Bay of Biscay

* **Benito Mussolini:** (“Il Duce”) Prime Minister of Italy from 1922 to 1943

* **Henri Philippe Pétain, Maréchal:** A hero from WW1 who served as the Chief of State of Vichy France from 1940 to 1944

* **Harold Adrian Russell (‘Kim’) Philby:** An MI6 operative in charge of the subsection dealing with Spain and Portugal. Philby was later discovered to be one of the ‘Cambridge Five’ – double-agents working for the USSR

* **Erwin Rommel:** (“the Desert Fox”) A German general who served as field marshal in the Wehrmacht (Defence Force)

* **Otto Skorzeny:** A lieutenant-colonel in the Waffen-SS, he led the successful rescue of Benito Mussolini from where he was imprisoned in the Appennine Mountains

* **John Vereker, 6th Viscount Gort:** Commander-in-Chief of the British Expeditionary Force (BEF) in France

Part 1

Paris, Early June 1943

Chapter One

The café's door chimed, allowing in the evening breeze, the hum of street noise, and a man. He shuffled past, head down, shoulders stooped. His right hand, deep into his pocket, signalled to us that he'd been compromised. Sorrow ripped through me; Pierre Alaunt was a good man, and a friend to the Resistance.

'He's being followed,' Michel muttered. 'Two goons. Ten paces behind him.'

Which meant they weren't here for Pierre; they were here for whoever approached him.

I rotated my glass of Pernod and stretched my fingers. It was less than two months since I'd narrowly escaped a Nazi ambush, and no one had yet identified me. I was in no hurry to put myself back in the Nazis' cross hairs, not with a set of forged papers hidden in my handbag. Michel nodded; five minutes and we would leave. It was just long enough not to look suspicious.

'When will you speak with your Uncle Maurice?' Michel lit a cigarette, and slipped the case into his breast pocket.

'Uncle Maurice' was my commanding officer, Maurice Buckmaster. As the head of Special Operations Executive's French Section in London, he would need to know that Pierre was no longer reliable, and get word to whoever else Pierre worked

with. I took a deep breath, inhaling Michel's nicotine, and wishing the Nazis hadn't taken such a dim view of women smoking.

'Tomorrow.'

A glass shattered on the floor. The woman who had dropped her drink was unfamiliar, and if she worked with the Resistance, it wasn't through our cell, but that didn't stop Pierre's shadows from mobilising. One of them moved towards the woman who had dropped her drink while the other blocked the door. A low rumble of voices rose and then subsided at a sharp glance from the first man.

'*Merde*,' Michel muttered, the only visible sign of his nerves.

I finished my Pernod as the goon finished searching the woman's satchel and signalled for her to move to the door. His colleague would search her person for anything suspicious, like the set of forged documents hidden in the lining of my handbag. My fingers explored the underside of the table for a nook, a nail, anything to hide the documents on, but found nothing.

The goon searched two other tables before coming to us. Michel's shoulders arched in a Gallic shrug. He retrieved his documents from his breast pocket and handed them across with a neutral expression. I hoped I looked as blasé as I placed my own papers on the table. The goon's nose flared as his thumb stroked my photograph. His head tilted to one side, watching my reaction as his fingernail worried the edge. His eyes were black, almost opaque, beneath a single dark brow. A corner of his mouth rose. From across the river, Notre Dame rang half past ten. I met his gaze.

'Curfew's approaching.'

He tossed my papers onto the floor, watching them scatter. Michel shook his head, warning me to hold my tongue. Teeth clenched, I dropped to my knees to collect them. The goon stepped closer so that his crotch was level with my eyes. Options ran through my mind. I could easily disable him. Even kill him. But for what purpose? A fleeting satisfaction followed by incarceration? Holding that thought in my mind, I waited. Ten seconds. Twenty.

He stood back and pointed to the man at the door. I'd passed the first hurdle; the second would be worse.

The second thug emptied my handbag on the table, watching as the detritus of my daily life scattered across it. I caught the compact before it fell to the floor. Buck had given it to me the night I parachuted in to France last December. I ran my fingers over the words etched onto it. *Bonne Chance*. I hadn't thought I'd need luck back then, but I wouldn't mind a healthy dose of it now.

He stared at my silver cigarette case, and I held my breath. The Nazis had decreed that smoking was unladylike. I refrained in public only because I had to. Would he use that as an excuse to arrest me?

'It's mine,' Michel said, picking it up. 'The lighter as well.'

Snatching the case from his hand, the thug opened it up, inspecting it. It wouldn't be the first time I'd used it to carry notes, but this time it was empty. He slid out a cigarette and lit it. Blew the smoke in Michel's face.

'Is it?'

'Her bag is big enough to carry it.'

'So it is.'

The goon peered inside, and then ran his fingers around the interior, feeling for any anomaly. He must have touched the papers, felt the ridges in the lining. The tingling in my spine intensified.

My bag was thrown aside as he moved to inspect my coat. I tried not to sigh. The coat was clean; the danger passed. Michel was shovelling my belongings back into the bag when the goon rotated his finger. I followed his instructions, turning while he patted down my back. I focused on the wall, trying not to react, but when he reached around me and fondled my breasts, my temper erupted.

‘*Cochon!*’ I whirled around and barely stopped myself from driving my knee between his legs.

He gave me a slow, smarmy grin. It was a challenge; he wanted a reason to arrest me. A reason that his fat fingers hadn’t found. I was seething, but not stupid. A trip to the Gestapo’s headquarters wasn’t on my agenda. I raised my head, looking down my nose at him. He laughed, and waved us through, as if it were all a game.

‘Opportunistic sod,’ I growled once we were on the other side of the door.

‘Fucking pig,’ Michel agreed. He put one hand at my back and guided me into the crowd. ‘Do not forget – they are closing in,’ he murmured. ‘You must be careful, Cécile.’

‘Always.’

We walked together as far as the Pont Neuf. As he leant in to kiss my cheek, Michel reminded me: ‘No unnecessary risks, *ma chérie*.’

Pierre Alaunt was proof that sometimes being careful wasn’t enough. I mentally formed the message to Buck as I passed the

darkened lamp posts that lined the bridge. The City of Lights, temporarily extinguished. And yet, there was something oddly comforting about it. In daylight, it was easy to get distracted. The dark allowed the senses to come alive. Only in the moonlight would I have noticed the man on the far side, scuttling along the Quai des Grands-Augustins, hunched into a dark coat despite the warm night.

A sensible woman would continue home, but he held my attention. Memory put a name to the face: Jean-Roger Demarque, a collaborator who lived in my district. If he was up to something, I wanted to know what it was. Ignoring Michel's warning, I followed him.

Demarque eased down a side street, pausing outside a bistro where a group of German soldiers tried to persuade a pair of women to stay for one last drink. He looked around and, satisfied that he'd attracted no undue attention, stepped inside.

The blackout curtains were drawn, hiding him from sight. In truth, I'd already risked too much. With the incriminating second set of papers in my bag, and curfew fast approaching, I needed to get home. Whoever the little weasel was after would have to fend for themselves.

Instead of moving, I counted the seconds with each heartbeat, with each couple rushing past.

Five minutes later Jean-Roger emerged, flanked by a German officer and two soldiers. I followed at a discreet distance as he led them into the labyrinth of Saint-Germain, weaving through the little streets to an unassuming building. Wrought-iron balconies hung like dark lace from the second and third floor windows, and the flowers in the window boxes were lovingly maintained.

By my landlady.

That bastard had led the Germans to my home.

The officer banged on the door with the butt of his gun.

My landlady was a good woman, but she wouldn't risk her life for me. How long before my image was nailed to buildings and signposts?

I shoved my hair out of my eyes and forced my breathing to slow. My backup flat was on the other side of Paris, and the house where I stored my set and transmitted from was in the suburbs. Too far to go without getting caught for breaking curfew. Assuming that the Gestapo weren't already waiting at those locations.

That left only one option.

Madame Renard had proven her loyalty to the Resistance and to me – standing fast in the aftermath of a Gestapo ambush, in which I'd been shot twice. Despite being under suspicion herself, she hid me, wounded and feverish, in her cellar. It wasn't fair to put her in danger again, but there was no other choice. If Demarque knew where I lived, he knew the name I was using. A quick flare from my lighter took care of that problem. Pulling the loose thread in the lining of my bag, I retrieved the spare set.

Voices echoed in the night as a gendarme questioned someone. I eased around the corner to see him shaking his head at a young couple. Shivers racked my body, and sweat trickled down my spine. Madame Renard's home was less than a quarter of a mile away but seemed farther away than London.

I doubled back to make sure I wasn't followed. Spent the better part of an hour ducking in and out of the winding streets

until I was convinced it was safe to turn into the small alleyway leading to Madame Renard's house. Torn between regret for involving her and my own need to survive, I paused before raising my hand to rap once on her door, almost too soft for an old woman to hear. The bolt scraped open and one gnarled hand pulled me into the house. She closed the door firmly behind her and leant back against it.

'What happened?'

'I need a place to hide for the night. My cover was blown.' Her face paled and I added, 'No one followed me here.'

'Of course they didn't.'

She folded her arms over her bony chest, the Luger a lethal black mass, incongruous against her yellow dressing gown.

How on earth had she acquired a German pistol? And a Luger at that? Then again, if anyone could, it would be Madame Renard. She had enough food stashed in her cellar to single-handedly stock the black market, so why not a Luger? She set the gun down on a side table, and led the way into the kitchen.

'I'm sorry to ask this of you, madame.'

'Faugh!' She waved her hand dismissively and uncorked a bottle of wine. 'What happened?'

'Someone sold me out.'

'A friend?'

'A neighbour. Jean-Roger bloody Demarque. I'm not sure why, but I don't suppose it matters, damn him.'

As I removed the last cigarette from the silver case, the memory of an awkward dinner invitation, followed by a polite but firm refusal surfaced. At the time, he seemed to take the rejection well, but that was months ago. Had he been planning his

revenge all this time, or had he found some shred of evidence? It took three tries with the lighter before the blasted cigarette ignited. I sucked in the smoke, savouring the familiar rush before exhaling a cloud of smoke and nerves. 'I don't suppose it matters,' I repeated.

'I don't suppose it does.' Madame Renard placed two glasses on the table and shooed her cat off a chair. 'Where will you go?'

'Out of Paris, obviously.'

'That's not much of an answer, Cécile.' She pushed a glass across to me. 'Is there somewhere you can go?'

'The couriers escort downed airmen to the Normandy coast. They use trawlers to take them back across the Channel.'

'You're going home?' Her voice was flat, making her opinion clear.

'Don't be absurd.' I toyed with the glass, wishing my hands would stop shaking. 'I'm sure they'll need another wireless operator up north. Maybe someone to co-ordinate the pickups.'

The old lady stood up and rummaged in the pantry. She put the battered tin of biscuits in the centre of the table and sat down. On the lid, one of Alphonse Mucha's redheads pouted, a heavy-handed reminder of happier times. I pushed it away.

'Thank you, but I'm not hungry.'

Madame Renard treated me to another condescending look and opened the tin to reveal a stack of photographs. Arthritic fingers flicked through them, pausing now and again, until they lingered on an image. She put it on the table and turned it around so I could see.

Two men flanked a young woman in a floral dress, standing in front of a stone cottage. A breeze had caught her hair, and

her hand was raised, holding her locks in place. The man on the right was a bit older, perhaps thirty, and bore a family resemblance to the woman. The man on the left was shorter, but had a strong bone structure and a determined chin.

‘A good-looking set,’ I said.

She harrumphed and jabbed a finger at the man on the left.

‘My nephew, Franc Laronde, outside his house with his wife Christiane and her brother.’

I forced back a bad feeling and waited for her to continue. She took her time, picking up her glass and taking a delicate sip.

‘They live near Rouen.’

‘Madame, with all due respect, this isn’t the best time to matchmake.’

She wheezed, spraying the burgundy over her hand. Then the laughter erupted.

‘Cécile, you fool, Franc is part of the Resistance. If you can get to him he’ll help you, or at least introduce you to someone who can.’

I opened and closed my mouth a few times before my voice caught up.

‘Madame, I don’t know what to say!’

‘A simple thank you will do. Now, fetch me the Michelin map from the parlour, and I’ll show you how to get there.’

As the birds fly, it didn’t look far. If the trains were running, I would be able to get there within a few hours. Only the railway stations would be the first place they’d look for me.

‘Perhaps a boat up the Seine,’ I mused out loud.

‘Still too obvious. Try a bicycle.’

‘I don’t have one.’

‘Take your friend Juliette’s. She left it here, and I don’t think she’ll be back in Paris anytime soon to protest.’

‘No, I don’t suppose she will.’

Juliette, or rather my fellow agent Dominique, had boarded with Madame Renard. In the aftermath of the ambush, Dom had been arrested and taken to the Gestapo’s HQ on Avenue Foch. She’d escaped, and as far as I knew, had successfully disappeared.

Madame Renard’s eyes narrowed. ‘You do know how to ride a bicycle, don’t you?’

I’d ridden on the handlebars a few times. What was there to it? You sat, you pedalled, and you got where you needed to go. Anyone could do it.

‘Of course I can.’

Madame Renard’s lips pursed. I met her gaze with all the innocence I could muster until she sighed.

‘Sleep for a couple of hours. You’ll go just before it gets light.’

The alleyway was deserted, but it was foolish to think no one watched from behind the shutters and blackout curtains. Madame herself watched from the doorway as I wheeled the bicycle on to the street and straddled it.

‘Perhaps you’re waiting for the Second Coming?’ she asked, her voice low.

‘Ha, bloody ha.’

I tossed the strap of my handbag over my head and straddled the frame. She held up a finger for me to wait and disappeared into her house for a moment before returning with the Luger, a book with a postcard tucked a third of the way in, and a box of chocolates.

‘Never go to anyone empty-handed,’ she advised.

Did she realise that where I was going, the Luger was a more effective asset than the sweets?

‘Cécile, for once, try and be subtle. Use the chocolates first.’ She tucked the chocolates and the pistol into my handbag, but held back on the paperback. Curious, I reached for it.

‘*The Count of Monte Cristo?*’ I blustered. ‘Have some faith, Madame!’

Wearing a familiar expression of pained patience, she waited until I removed the postcard. On the front was the striped cathedral at Marseilles. On the back was a brief note, pleasantly bland as all postcards were these days. The message wasn’t on the card – it *was* the card. Two friends I had long thought captured or dead had written that card. For me.

‘They’re alive?’

My voice was thick and I fought to hold back tears. I couldn’t cry. Not in public, not even in front of Madame Renard.

‘So it would seem,’ she said. ‘And if they can beat the Boche, so can you. Keep the card if you want, but also keep the book. A woman alone looks suspicious, but one with a book, oddly less so.’

The smile didn’t reach her eyes, and she looked down as her gnarled fingers buckled my bag closed. Madame was a tough old girl, and although she tried to hide it, she cared. So did I.

‘I’ll be fine.’

‘I know,’ she said. ‘Don’t worry. I’ll make sure the right people know about you. And your neighbour. Now, get out of here.’

Swallowing the lump in my throat, I grasped the handlebars. If it were anyone other than Madame Renard, I might have paused

for a hug, a last kiss on the cheek, a murmur of thanks. But even if I knew how to extend the sentiment, Madame was too crusty to accept it. I took a deep breath, steadying myself. Looked up to clear my own eyes. The last rays of the moon provided just enough light. As long as no one stopped me, I'd be in Rouen tomorrow or, worst case, the day after. I glared at the red metal frame, willing it into submission. Refusing to comply, it wobbled a few times and pitched me into the gutter. I cringed at the noise and looked around, but there was nothing, not even the twitch of a curtain.

Madame Renard muffled a snort. 'Shall I fetch someone to hold the saddle for you?'

'You shall not.' I dusted off my stinging palms and rose to my feet. 'I'll be fine.'

'Yes. You said. Would you like a plaster for your knee?'

I glared at the thin red trail snaking its way down my leg.

'I've had worse.'

'I remember.'

She flicked her fingers at me, urging me back on the bicycle.

It took three more tries before I was able to leave the street. My hands ached from the death grip they had on the handlebars, and sweat made my dress stick to my back. At this rate, it wouldn't be a day or two before I got to Rouen. It would be a week or two.

And I'd arrive in an ambulance.

It was barely dawn but vehicles were already queuing up to have their papers and vehicles inspected at the checkpoint leaving the city. So far I'd been lucky. No one stopped me as I weaved my way through the streets. There were plenty of posters fluttering

in the breeze, but none with my face on them. How long my luck would last was a different question.

‘You!’ The German-accented voice boomed out.

The young soldier held his assault rifle in the crook of his arm as he pointed in my direction. I looked over my shoulder, but there was no one behind me. I pointed at my own chest.

‘Me, sir?’

‘*Ja*. Come here.’

I raised my chin and cycled around a horse-drawn cart and the two Germans peering underneath it. The man holding the reins looked away as I passed.

‘Your papers?’

The soldier cradled a rifle in one arm. He thrust the other out for my identity card. I handed it over with a weak smile.

‘Madame Laforge?’ Pale eyes darted between my face and the photograph.

‘Lafontaine.’

‘Yes. Of course. And where are you going so early this morning?’

He stood so that I was half-blinded by the sun. I shielded my eyes with my hand and allowed the all-too-real wobble to enter my voice.

‘My aunt is ill and has been asking for her son. She’s sent me to collect him.’

‘From where?’

‘Halfway to Caen.’

‘You couldn’t use a telephone? Send a telegraph?’

‘Not if I expect him to answer. Or to come and see her.’

A reluctant smile teased his lips. ‘Like that, is it?’

‘I’m afraid so.’

‘And you’re going to get there on the bicycle?’

I held up my raw palms. ‘If it weren’t important, do you really think I’d voluntarily travel on this godforsaken thing? My cousin has a permit for a car. He can drive us back.’

The corners of his mouth twitched as he returned my papers.

‘Have you never heard of a train?’

‘Of course I have.’ I shrugged and lied. By the time he checked, I’d be long gone. ‘I’ve also heard the British bombed the line.’

His smile froze. ‘Again? Damned Tommies,’ he muttered and waved me through.

Chapter Two

My death grip on the handlebars eased as the miles passed, but I was wary of stopping. Partially because I was eager to get to Rouen, but more out of the fear that if I stopped too long, the muscles in my shoulders and legs, already burning, might cease working.

I stopped late that night at a half-burnt barn, slept for a few hours and left before daybreak against the protests of my sore body. Fuelled by desperation, I cycled through the pain and the sun had already set by the time I rode past the stone cottage from Madame's photograph. It was a mile or so outside the nearest village, and set far enough back from the road to be almost hidden from view.

Circling the cottage would bring unnecessary attention. I did what I could to make sure there was no tail before coasting to a stop in front of Laronde's house. My knees buckled as I slid from the bicycle and dug my fists into the aching muscles to coax them into action. Slipped Madame Renard's Luger into the waistband of my skirt, and adjusted my cardigan over it. Combed my hair and applied lipstick to make myself look respectable. My gloves hid the blisters, but there wasn't much to be done about the scraped knees, other than hope no one would notice.

The couriers claimed nine out of ten homes would open the door to a resistance member, but that one in a hundred would

summon the police. Laronde might open the door, but would he betray me?

I leant the bicycle against a tree and took out Madame's chocolates, just in case I had been seen. With the reassuring weight of the Luger at my back, I knocked on Laronde's door. Instead of the silence I'd expected, the door opened and I was pulled inside. A bright light shone into my eyes, almost blinding me. I stepped backwards until I pressed against the door.

'Who are you?' a voice demanded in French, the accent low and guttural. German. His dark hair was slicked back from a wide forehead, accenting small porcine eyes set too close to each other. He wore a well-tailored suit rather than uniform.

Hello, Gestapo!

Sod the subtle approach; I would have to brazen it out.

'Just what's this all about?' I demanded, throwing off his arm and stepping to the side. A second man, taller and slimmer with a scar that bisected his cheek, pointed a Walther PPK at me. I jabbed my finger at him. 'And you put that away. You're liable to hurt someone with that!'

'Where is he?' Pig-eyes asked.

'Who?'

'Who do you think?' he snapped.

'Franc Laronde? If I thought he wasn't in, do you really think I'd be here?' Sweat trailed down my back, but my voice remained even.

'Why are you here?'

'Madame Laronde kept an eye on my mother while I was away.' I held up the box of chocolates. 'I brought her a thank-you gift.'

‘At this time of night?’

‘It’s still before curfew. Besides, I’ve only just returned!’

‘Where were you?’

‘Your papers!’ the other man barked.

‘Yes, of course.’

I put the chocolates down on a side table and, keeping my back to the wall to avoid them seeing my hidden gun, rummaged in my bag. I should have left the Luger in there; with both men watching my every move, it would have been easier to grab.

‘Black market chocolates?’ Scar sneered.

‘No. Just old. And probably stale. You can have them.’

Maybe Madame Renard had poisoned them.

‘Papers, Madame!’

‘Yes. They’re at the bottom of my bag. As usual,’ I grumbled.

He grabbed it from me and began to root around for them.

Despite my compliance, Pig-eyes raised his left hand to strike me. Instinct, months of training, and a deep-seated anger at the situation dictated what happened next. I deflected his blow and drove my right fist into his nose. He rocked back and before he could recover, I gripped his shoulder and slammed my knee into his groin. He doubled over, resting his pistol on his thigh and gasping for breath. Blood poured from his nose, pooling on the rug.

Despite its small size, Scar’s PPK sounded like a cannon in the small parlour. Dust settled from the ceiling and I locked my eyes with Scar’s.

‘Who are you?’ He pointed the pistol at me.

‘Who are you to bloody attack me?’ I growled, calculating and recalculating my options.

He stepped closer. 'I will ask you again: who are you and why are you here?'

I'd rehearsed this, was trained for this with sergeants correcting me until I could do it without even thinking. A cold confidence settled over me and I pulled Pig-eyes erect, his back to my breast. Wrapped my hand around his and shot Scar between the eyes. As he crumbled, I buried the pistol's nose in the fleshy folds of Pig-eyes' chin and fired again.

His body hit the floor with a low thud. A trickle of blood traced its way from the third eye in Scar's head, disappearing into his dark oiled hair. They were dead, and I'd killed them. I fired another round into each of them. Just to make sure. Because either they were dead, or I was.

I stuffed the chocolates back into my bag and bolted, in case anyone had heard the shots and called for reinforcements. Grabbed the bicycle and pedalled hard, throwing myself behind a low rock wall only when I heard a vehicle pass. Cringed when I realised it was a transport, heading towards Laronde's house.

Forcing my heartbeat to slow, I considered my options. Fleeing on the bicycle wasn't possible. Too many people could have seen me and quite frankly, there was no way I'd be able to out-pedal the Gestapo. Franc Laronde was gone, maybe dead. He wouldn't be able to help me, and without him, how in the blazes would I find the Resistance? What else was there? Hot-wiring a car? Without the right papers, I'd be caught at the first checkpoint.

I closed my eyes and remembered Madame Renard's map. The lines criss-crossing the countryside. She was quite right: passenger trains were too risky.

But there was one other option, and it wasn't far.

Chapter Three

Dim starlight revealed the men in dark coveralls, milling around outside a medium-sized station house on the far side of the tracks. Casks were lined up on the platform, ready for transfer. I breathed a small sigh of relief. I wouldn't have long to wait for the train, and guessed that if it stopped here, then there would be other local stations like this, transporting wine east to Germany, or south towards Vichy. And frequent stops would give me plenty of opportunities to slip off once it was safe. Once far enough from Rouen, I'd be able to formulate a plan to get in touch with the local Resistance cells.

I crouched in the bushes and waited. Heard the engine before I saw it, clacking along the tracks, followed closely by flat carriages carrying tarpaulin-covered tanks. The train slowed as the container carriages came into sight and I crossed the strap of my bag over my head, leaving my hands free.

Getting on board proved surprisingly easy. Using the train itself to block me from view, I hauled myself onto the junction between the carriages and eased over until I could grip the lever. The sounds farther down the train hid the creak as I eased the door open and slid through, grateful that there were no locks. And if there wasn't much room between the casks to manoeuvre, at least I was reasonably certain this carriage wouldn't be opened until the train reached its ultimate destination. I eased to the floor and allowed myself to smile.

With a jolt, the train began to move. Braced against the casks, I held the Luger in my hand. Just in case.

The rhythm of the rails and the swish of wine had a lulling effect, and I only realised I'd slept when my head bumped against the wooden barrel. Pins and needles tortured my legs and I shifted as much as I could. How much time had passed? Was I far enough from Rouen yet?

Clickety-clack.

It was less than two days since I'd fled Paris and the journey was worse than I'd imagined. How did the couriers do it? Did they get used to the constant fear? The confinement? The overwhelming stench of burgundy that seeped from a broken cask?

Clickety-clack . . . *THROMMMM* . . .

The rhythm changed. It didn't undulate. It was loud, insistent. And frightfully familiar.

A sick feeling radiated from the pit of my belly as I realised that trains were bombed all the time, and this train pulled more than just local vintages.

Oh, hell!

I tucked the Luger in the back of my skirt and scrambled to my feet.

An explosion rocked the train. Bracing myself, I leant hard on the latch. It moved easily enough, but the door refused to open. The blasted thing was either broken or disabled, and the RAF were trying to make sure the whole damn train was as well.

Another bomb exploded but the train continued forward. How the bomber could have missed a large object, following a predictable trail, was something I could only be grateful for, and if I had any chance of survival, I had to get out.

A whistling sound ended in a loud BOOM! The train shuddered and rocked from side to side.

Please, God, don't let me die this way!

The carriage leant too far to the left. Wood protested, cracking. A couple of casks slipped their restraints and crashed into the little space by the door. I dropped to the ground and shielded myself as best I could as the train derailed and rolled. My stomach rolled with it, and I gagged.

Would Baker Street learn what had happened to me? Drowned in a cocktail of wine and vomit. What then? Would the very proper Miss Vera Atkins, Buckmaster's second-in-command, write to my mother?

Dear Lady Anne.

I regret to inform you that your daughter, while on assignment, drowned in a sea of burgundy. You'll be proud to know she did her best . . .

To what? Drink her way out? A high-pitched giggle escaped, ruthlessly cut off by a sob.

Think of the scandal! my mother would wail. If she could be bothered to read the letter.

Pull yourself together! Miss Atkins's cool voice cut through my panic. *You know what to do!*

I forced a breath into my lungs, and another. I'd get out all right. Sod the scandal, I wasn't ready to die. I pushed myself free of the casks and fought my way to the door. Any sound I made was inaudible over the roar of the engines and screaming voices.

Another bomb threw the carriage as if it were a child's toy. I made myself as small as I could, held on until the motion stopped. I'd been battered by the casks, but nothing was broken.

Smoke stung my eyes and filled my lungs. I doubled over, choking, and this time I allowed the bile to escape. Wiped my mouth clean with the back of my hand. The carriage wasn't yet ablaze, but I was surrounded by wine casks. Wooden casks, in a wooden carriage. On a train that also carried munitions. I had to get out.

'Shit, shit, shit!'

Splinters clawed my legs as I sloshed through the spilt wine. The carriage lay on its side, with the sliding doors above and below, and the smoke thickening.

Desperation reinforced determination. I began to climb towards the door. Grasped a piece of metal that must have once circled a barrel. Ignored its heat and wedged it between the doors, working it until they slid open with a screech of protest.

Damn it, I will get out!

I dried my hands on my skirt and reached up. Gripped the door jamb harder, pulling myself up and through the door. I crouched on top of the carriage to minimise my silhouette and took stock. The engine and first three carriages of the train disappeared into the distance. The bombers too were fading into the night. The train had become a conflagration. And four soldiers, guards I guessed, stood about one hundred feet away, cradling rifles.

Crouching low, I moved to the far side and slipped over the edge, my feet finding purchase on the undercarriage. The metal was hot, and my hands were already blistered. I didn't feel either,

yet. The next carriage exploded, the blast flinging me from the carriage. I moved with it, rolling as I hit the ground.

The countryside was flat and open; there was nowhere to hide. Making myself as low as I could, I ran from the blaze and the soldiers guarding it. I'd be damned if I allowed them to catch me now. I ran, Luger in hand, until I found a small copse of trees. A quick glance behind confirmed that I hadn't been followed and I allowed myself to drop to my knees and gasp for air.

I stayed that way for several moments. Until I felt cold metal press against the back of my head.

Chapter Four

I slowly raised my hands.

‘Drop the gun,’ the voice growled.

I lowered the gun to the ground, realising that the voice, a raspy baritone, spoke English – with a slight Scottish burr – although without seeing him I could make no assumptions. It could be a trick to get me to compromise myself, although covered in blood, sweat and smoke, it wouldn’t take much. Leaving the Luger on the ground, I raised my hands, turning to look at him.

He wore the simple cotton shirt and trousers that RAF men often wore under the flight suits. His sandy-blond hair was plastered to his head, but his face was clean-shaven. He was probably shot down within the last few hours, and ditched the helmet and flight suit along with the plane. Sensible, although the cut of his clothing, not to mention the Webley pointed at my forehead, marked him as foreign.

‘What’s yer name?’

‘Nathalie.’

‘Good. Ye speak English. Where are we?’

‘France.’

The pilot winced. A bruise was forming high on his forehead. The skin hadn’t broken, but it was probably enough to give him a monstrous headache.

‘I kind o’ figured that much. Where in France?’

It was a good question, and as I had no answer, I shrugged.
'Alexander Sinclair,' he said. 'RAF. I need you to take me to the Resistance.'

I looked down at myself before meeting his gaze.

'Don't really know where to find them.'

He looked as if he wanted to challenge that until his shoulders drooped. He stared up at the moon.

'Damn.'

'Put the Webley away. I don't know where they are, but I didn't say I wouldn't help you. Just not while you're pointing the gun at me.'

'Why?'

I shrugged, not entirely sure of the answer.

'We'll look less suspicious travelling together.'

'And ye're already running from something,' he guessed.
'What?'

'Nothing that concerns you.' I got to my feet and dusted off my hands on my bottom. 'Unless you're planning to shoot me, put that damned English gun away.'

'You have a plan?'

I didn't, but that didn't stop me from improvising.

'For now, we walk.' I pointed in the direction away from the burning train. 'I need clean clothing and you need something that looks less English.'

'British,' he corrected, in a way that seemed more automatic than condescending.

Refraining from pointing out that while the French might note the difference, neither they nor the Germans would care, I started walking. He tucked the gun away and caught up easily.

After a mile or two of silence, I murmured, 'That bruise is fresh. When did you get shot down?'

'Couple of hours ago. We hadn't dropped everything on the bombing run, and the squadron leader thought it was a good idea to drop them on the train. Didn't see the 109s until it was too late.' His wry smile faded when he took in my singed clothes. 'Stupid idea.'

'That was you, wasn't it? The squadron leader?'

His shrug was as good as an answer.

'Got into the RAF, despite the accent, because I could fly. Moved through the ranks because I was better at staying alive than a lot of good men. One stupid decision and here I am.'

'Well, you're not dead yet, so that's a bonus. Let's keep moving.'

We took turns standing on guard, back turned, while the other washed in a stream. Sinclair again turned away when I filched a blouse and skirt from an unattended clothes line. The skirt was too short, and the blouse a bit loose. Neither of us would stand up to scrutiny, but from a distance, we were passable enough.

We stayed off the main roads, opting for the less-travelled ones, as much in the hopes of finding Sinclair more appropriate attire as it was to avoid unnecessary attention.

In England road signs were removed or altered in case of a German invasion. Assuming French road signs were reliable, we just skirted another town near Vouvray when we heard the roar of a motorcycle. I pulled Sinclair back into the shrubbery and lay flat beside him. His breath caught in his throat as the motorcycle slowed.

'Through your mouth,' I whispered.

‘What?’

‘Breathe through your mouth. It’s quieter.’

He nodded, his hand clenching his sidearm. The motorcycle stopped and the driver helped the man in the sidecar out. The latter stretched, and pushed his driving goggles onto his forehead. Hand on the flies of his black uniform, he ambled towards us.

‘SS,’ I mouthed at Sinclair.

The man’s trousers were now undone and he was braced to relieve himself. He was close enough that if he looked to the side, he’d see Sinclair.

The man must have heard something and his head turned towards us. There was no thought, and no other option. My hand tensed, fingers pressed together. Thumb up, palm down in a familiar gesture. In two long strides, I was out of the brush and striking the back of his neck next to his spine.

No one could have been more surprised than me when he crumbled to the ground. The move was well-practised, but had never been used outside the practice grounds. There was no gunfire, but the second man fell, a small blade quivering from his eye.

‘Gunfire echoes. I didn’t think we’d want to attract attention.’

He was right, and from what I could see, capable of handling himself. Maybe there were worse travelling partners.

He pulled the knife free from the dead man and was about to clean it on the black tunic when I stopped him.

‘He’s about your size, isn’t he?’ I said.

And with a similar fair colouring to Sinclair; an idea began to gel. We made quick work of plundering the bodies and hid them in the woods. They would be found, but hopefully not until we were long gone.

I fiddled with the strap for the goggles, watching Sinclair from under my eyelashes. Dressed as an *SS-Untersturmführer*, he looked frighteningly authentic. His Webley was out of sight and the German's Luger was holstered at his side. I swallowed hard, and tamped down the visceral fear that the uniform brought as he straddled the BMW.

‘Most officers are driven.’

‘No’ when they have a girl wi’ them. Stop arguin’ and get in the sidecar.’

I shook my head at this demonstration of male ego, and slipped the goggles over my eyes. Sinclair fired up the engine and revved it a few times.

‘Where to?’

‘They’ll expect us to head to Vouvray or Tours. Maybe north, towards the coast. We’ll go south, I think. At least for now, then we can head west. We’ll need to keep to the small roads.’

‘I don’t know these roads.’

‘South,’ I repeated, pointing. ‘And don’t forget to drive on the right-hand side.’

We skirted Vouvray and picked up the road leading south. The first checkpoint was at Montbazou, a simple barrier manned by two soldiers with a third sitting in front of a little hut. I held my breath as we approached. Had my description made it this far? Were alarms raised about the missing SS soldiers and their vehicle? Or the dead Gestapo thugs in Rouen? What if we were stopped and the Scot questioned? He had no French, and probably not a lot of German, if any. If we were caught, we’d both be shot as spies.

The same thoughts must have been running through Sinclair's mind, but his expression, or what showed beneath his goggles, was stony. Maybe even arrogant. He didn't stop for the checkpoint, just slowed the bike enough to allow the guards to see the SS flashes at his neck.

His gamble paid off. The two guards snapped to attention and saluted us, the third moving quickly to remove the barrier. I counted to twenty before releasing the air from my lungs. Sinclair glanced over. One corner of his mouth twitched and he winked.

We drove for another hour before stopping in a small village. Sinclair stretched before helping me from the sidecar. He patted down his pockets and thrust a wad of French francs into my hand.

'Food and beer,' he directed, before stalking off behind a tree to relieve himself.

For someone who had baled from a plane, cracked his head, held me at gunpoint and killed an SS officer in less than twenty-four hours, the Scot was doing rather well. But there was one other thing to do first, even more important than food. I spat on a handkerchief and cleaned the grime from my face. Applied a coat of lipstick and sauntered through the town until I found several broadsheets nailed on a board in front of the post office, captioned with names, aliases, and alleged crimes. Even with a healthy dose of imagination, none of the likenesses bore any resemblance to me, or anyone I knew. With a forced smile, I walked into the shop, surprised to find it well-provisioned. A young woman, neatly attired, put down her duster.

'May I help you?'

I hummed a response and wandered through the aisles. Most of the goods were local, which explained a fair amount. A small area stocked beer and wine, in the blue bottles that had become common since the start of the war.

‘It’s a beautiful day for a picnic.’ The woman’s voice, high and strident, jerked me out of my thoughts.

‘Yes, I suppose so.’

Unfamiliar with the labels, I directed her towards a bottle of red table wine and a locally brewed beer for the Scot.

‘I haven’t seen you here before.’ Her brown eyes narrowed as she studied me.

‘No. Just travelling through.’

The woman’s eyes narrowed again. Her voice was chilly as she quoted me an inflated price for my purchases. I gritted my teeth and handed her a note. Turned away without waiting for my change.

‘Have a good day, madame.’ Her voice dropped when she added, ‘Hope you get bombed, collaborating bitch.’

With one hand on the door frame, I turned and stared at her. Animosity blossomed, palpable between us. It was nothing short of foolish. If I were the collaborator she accused me of being, I could make life difficult for her, and still she showed defiance. I didn’t know if it made me proud, or sick.

We stopped at an open field far enough from the town to risk speaking in English. A handful of trees clustered into a corner, under which Sinclair set up the little picnic.

He took a swig from the beer bottle. ‘Not bad.’

‘I’m sure the shop girl would be glad to hear it.’ I sat beside him and looked at the meagre feast. ‘Damn, I forgot to buy glasses. And a knife . . .’

I looked meaningfully at his ankle where he sheathed the small blade.

‘You’re no’ using my sgian dubh to serve lunch.’

He ripped off a piece of bread and stuffed it into his mouth.

‘No? Well, fair enough. Your little dagger has other uses.’

‘That it does,’ he said through a full mouth.

He moved to one knee, and pulled the knife from his sock.

‘Can you teach me how to throw it?’ I asked. ‘Like you did this morning?’

He eased back and looked at me with calculating eyes. So far, he hadn’t commented on the bloodstained clothes he found me in, or the ease with which I’d killed the SS man earlier. It wouldn’t last.

‘First I want to hear how an English girl comes to be in Occupied France.’

‘Wrong turn at Brighton?’

‘Ye’re wanting me to guess?’

‘Go ahead. This could be fun.’

I leant back, enjoying the sun on my face, and a rare moment of peace. When I opened my eyes, Sinclair was giving me an odd look.

‘What?’ I asked.

He shook his head. ‘Ye’re one cool customer, Nathalie. Do you kill men often?’

‘Only when they’re trying to kill me.’

I looked away. How could I explain that the moment I thought of them as men – as sons and husband, fathers and lovers – I was done for? It was easier to pretend they were the dummies we used in training – mannequins moving on unpredictable tracks.

His warm hand closed over mine. ‘You did well.’

‘I’m still alive,’ I murmured.

He squeezed my hand and, reaching, produced a multi-tool pocketknife from a pocket.

‘Let’s hope you stay that way.’

He unfolded a small metal curl and worked the cork from the wine bottle.

‘Convenient,’ I murmured.

‘Ye can thank the uniform’s previous owner.’

He handed me the bottle, laughing as I raised it to my mouth. Harsh tannins assaulted my tongue, and I struggled to swallow. I looked at the label. It wasn’t the wine I had selected; the shop girl must have switched it. Damn her.

‘No’ a good vintage?’ Sinclair drawled.

‘Better than what you can find in Scotland.’

I took another mouthful, more carefully this time.

He squinted into the sun. ‘That doesna take much. Ye’ll be fluent in French then?’

‘*Oui.*’

‘Why is it so hard to get you to talk?’

‘Usually it’s hard getting me to shut up,’ I admitted.

His full mouth twitched and I was surprised at how much I was enjoying his company. He took another swig of beer and sighed.

‘At least one of us can speak the native lingo. I can’t speak a word, short of finding . . . ah. Yes. No French.’ A red flush crept up his cheeks.

‘Finding a whore?’ I guessed. His eyes raised in shock. Did he think I’d never heard the word? ‘You can say that in French but you can’t order a glass of wine or a loaf of bread?’

‘One phrase isn’t that hard to remember,’ he said. ‘Dinnae get me wrong – the nuns tried to teach me French in school. The “Auld Alliance” and all that. It just didn’t take.’

Catholic, then. And well educated, for all he dismissed it. Coupled with the comment about his accent when we first met, a picture of Alex Sinclair was beginning to form: of a man who achieved whatever he set his mind to, despite the odd ‘stupid decision’. A useful ally to have.

‘How’s your German? The Boche can get away with not speaking French, but you may have a problem if you don’t understand German either. Did the nuns manage to drum that into you?’

‘Never thought I’d be needin’ it.’

I frowned. ‘Your head injury will buy us a bit of time, but not a lot. My German is passable, Squadron Leader. I’ll teach you enough to get us through.’

‘Alex.’

‘What?’

“Squadron Leader” is a mouthful. Ye may as well use my name. Alex.’

‘No. Your name is . . .’ Bracing one hand on his chest, I reached into his breast pocket for his papers, opening them with a flourish. ‘Heinrich Weber.’

He grabbed them back and repeated the name.

‘No. The Germans pronounce W’s like V’s, and ch’s, well, rather a bit softer than you would.’ I demonstrated, exaggerating the sounds. ‘Try again.’

‘Hein-rik Vayber.’

‘You know, he probably goes by Heini.’

I struggled to keep a solemn expression. He stared for a few seconds before bursting out in laughter.

‘Fine, then.’ He got to one knee. ‘Ye teach me what you can, and I’ll teach ye how to throw the sgian dubh.’

That afternoon we made a game of it, although it was anything but funny. Chances were that I’d never need to throw his knife, but how well he grasped the language could make all the difference to our survival. He’d never be able to speak well enough to fool the Boche, but as long as he could fool the French, we’d be fine.

‘We should keep moving.’

I reluctantly gathered our things and allowed Sinclair to help me up. He had a nice smile and a sharp dagger. There were worse travel companions.

The countryside passed in a blur of farms and vineyards, interspersed with small towns and villages, all but indistinguishable from one another until the motorcycle stuttered. Sinclair guided it to the side of the road and cut the engine.

‘What’s wrong?’

‘Out of petrol,’ he said.

‘And your German isn’t good enough to get more. Even if we had petrol coupons.’

He gave me a dark look. 'We passed a town a couple o' miles back. We can turn around or keep walking until we find the next town. What do you think?'

'There's still plenty of daylight. Let's keep going.'

When those SS soldiers were reported missing, someone would start looking for the vehicle. I'd trained as a wireless operator, not a courier. All I had to go on were my instincts, and they told me to keep moving.

Alex pushed the bike off the road and removed the goggles and leather helmet, flinching as it brushed over the bruise on his forehead. Fresh blood seeped through the bandage.

'Are you all right?'

He shrugged and echoed my own words: 'I'm alive.' He removed the motorcycle's identity plate and buried it some feet away, stamping hard on the earth. 'Let's keep it that way, eh?'

Sinclair took off his jacket and slung it over his shoulder. Without the stripes and lightning bolts, he was Alex once again, no longer SS officer Heini Weber. It was a dangerous look, but the sun was hot, and a man, even an SS officer, might relax when walking alone with his girl.

'Do you have a plan?' he asked.

I didn't, but wasn't about to admit that.

'Our best bet is to link up with the local Resistance. Then we get you on a boat back to Blighty.'

'What about you?'

'If they'll have me, I'll stay here. Continue working with the Resistance.'

His tone was a cross between curiosity and suspicion.

‘Why wouldn’t they have you?’

That surprised me; I’d expected him to ask why they would want me.

‘I . . . ah, I’ve had a run of bad luck lately.’

He burst out laughing. ‘You think?’

‘Don’t be difficult. If there aren’t any posters warning people about me yet, there may be soon enough.’

Now he was serious. ‘What have you done?’

I met his eyes, offering no apology.

‘I’ve survived.’

Necessity proved a better teacher than the nuns, and we continued the German lessons as we walked, peppering them with a light banter that allowed both of us to pretend that the danger had receded. As his confidence grew, Alex spoke of his home, his family, his love of flying.

‘Ye’re a very good listener, Nathalie,’ he said. ‘But ye don’t offer much, do ye?’

I wanted to talk to him, to tell him what had happened, how I got here. Already a strange sort of bond was forming between us. The couriers hadn’t really mentioned this phenomenon, and I hadn’t thought to ask whether it was usual or not. Whether they were able to keep themselves remote from the men they escorted, because I knew I was slipping.

Despite that, something held me back. Maybe it was my training, maybe the experience working with the Resistance, but I knew what a careless slip could do. I could offer Alex my friendship, but not my trust. Not yet.

‘It’s easier that way.’

He could have said something sarcastic; I knew my reply stung, but instead he nodded.

‘Fine. But please, whatever ye do choose to tell me, let it be th’ truth.’

Very aware that I hadn’t even given him my real name, I tried to smile.

‘Moving forward,’ he added.

‘Thank you.’ I nodded. ‘Are you upset?’

He seemed to think about that for a few steps.

‘No. Your secrets are yer own to tell.’ His smile was shy. ‘Maybe ye’ll tell me when ye’re ready.’

‘Maybe.’

He looked at the sky, clear and starry. The moon was nearing full and was bright enough for a pilot to see by, a drop to be made. We could have continued walking, but my legs hurt, in fact, my entire body ached.

‘Let’s bed down here,’ he suggested before I could. ‘It’s a mild night, and maybe safer out here in the middle of a field, than in a town.’

‘Sensible.’

I dropped my handbag and sank to the ground, ignoring his laugh. Under normal circumstances, I’d have suggested that we took turns sleeping, but if either of us was awake in five minutes it would be nothing short of a miracle. I stretched out, using the bag as a pillow, the pistol at my side.

‘The wildlife will let us know if anyone comes close.’

Alex was slower to lie down. ‘Nathalie?’

I opened one eye. ‘Yes?’

He rested his head on his neatly folded tunic. Stared at the sky and said, ‘I’m glad ye’re here.’

His hand reached across and squeezed mine.

Unsure whether he saw my smile, I closed my eye and answered, ‘I’m glad you’re here too, Alex. Goodnight.’

What woke me was Alex’s nightmare. Arms like steel pulled me close against his chest, the buttons of his shirt digging into my cheek. His teeth ground together, making a horrible sound, and his face contorted as if he were in pain.

‘Alex?’ I squirmed to free myself – to breathe.

He mumbled something and released me, rolling to his side in a foetal position. Awake now, I studied his face. It was difficult to believe I’d only just met him. Impossible to comprehend how much had elapsed in that time – in the last week, for that matter. I reached out, lightly holding his shoulder until the nightmare released him. His features softened to childlike innocence. Brushing a lock of sandy hair from his face, I impulsively dropped a kiss on his forehead.

Strong arms pulled me back, this time protectively. Chaste as it was, it was the first time I’d slept in the arms of a man other than my husband. He would be horrified if he could see me now. A filthy ragamuffin, in the arms of a strange man. A spy on the run.

I bit my lip and turned away from Alex. Philip wasn’t here to judge me; he’d left to go to war, and became one of its casualties. I’d get Alex Sinclair back to England and then would find myself another Resistance cell to work with.

There was still work to be done.