

It was Paris in the spring: a city built for lovers in the season of romance. And of all the couples strolling arm-in-arm through the Tuileries Garden on that Good Friday afternoon in 1939, none were as transcendently in love as the tall, willowy girl and the man at her side, who looked down at her with a smile of disbelief at his own good fortune. There was still a cold edge to the early April breeze, and the girl snuggled a little closer to his broad shoulders and raised her eyes to his, knowing that he would not be able to resist the temptation to kiss her, and damn the looks of any disapproving passers-by.

Elsewhere the twin pursuits of female perfection and manly elegance might be dismissed as wasteful, trivial fripperies. In Paris, however, beauty has always been regarded as a moral imperative, and this man and woman were two magnificent specimens. She had a figure that would have had any of the couture houses in the Rue Cambon or the Avenue Montaigne vying for her services as a model, were they not already fighting for her custom as a client, and her face was equally striking. Framed by a head of thick, glossy black hair, her features gave some indication of her strength of character. Her jaw and cheekbones were clean-cut, her chin firm, her nose a decisive line rather than an upturned button. But her bones were so fine and her lips so invitingly full that they belied any suggestion of masculinity. And her huge blue eyes, as clear as the African skies under which she had been born, and fringed by thick, black lashes that barely had need for mascara, completed the picture of ravishing femininity.

He was a mate fit for such a paragon. To her delight, he was still a full head taller than her, even when she wore high heels. Any woman walking by would notice the dark blond notes in his casually swept back hair and the film-star glow of that loving smile. This being Paris, she would also have spotted that while his dress was casual – a pair of charcoal-grey flannel trousers and

a tweed sports jacket, instead of a suit, and an open shirt with a silk cravat tucked into the collar, instead of a tie – every garment was perfectly cut and his shoes were immaculately polished.

What the girl beside him appreciated, which other women could not, was that this man's grey eyes were windows into a soul that was more sensitive and thoughtful than a passing impression might suggest. She knew that while his forearms were strong and well-muscled, he had an artist's hands. His long, elegant fingers could draw anything on which his eyes might rest, or run along the length of her body, playing with every bit of her and bringing her pleasure that she could never have imagined possible, only for it to be exceeded by the ecstasy that the most thrilling, powerful part of him could bring.

Truly, Saffron Courtney and Gerhard von Meerbach seemed blessed by all the gods, for they were as rich and well connected as they were pleasing to the eye. It would have taken the steeliest heart to begrudge them their good fortune.

'Is it really only three months since we met?' Gerhard said. 'I can't imagine life without you. How could I survive for twenty-seven years and have no idea you even existed? And then . . .'

'Then I landed at your feet,' Saffron said and giggled. 'Upside down, in a big heap, dressed as a man.'

When two people are in love, few things on earth are as fascinating to them as their love itself. Gerhard and Saffron constantly found new ways to recount the tale of their first meeting, like children wanting to hear the same bedtime story every night.

Saffron had pretended to be a man, disguising her femininity with bulky clothes, determined to experience the exhilaration of the Cresta Run in St. Moritz, even though the course was exclusively men only. She had charged down the ice run, refusing to slow down, and eventually was flung off her sled at one of the bends, cartwheeling into the snow. Her dark glasses were thrown off, and it was her eyes that seared into Gerhard's soul.

'I know!' he said. 'I took one look at you and . . . boom! I'd been hit by a million volts, like a Frankenstein film, you know, when the doctor puts all the electricity through the monster. I'd never known anything like it. Truly, love at first sight. And I thought, how can it be? How can I feel like this about a man? And then as you walked away . . .'

'I gave that little wiggle. I know, I had to. I felt the same as you did and I simply had to let you know.'

'And all because you were so brave . . . and so, so stubborn.' Gerhard laughed. 'So Saffron! You had to go down the Cresta Run, even though you knew only men were allowed.'

Saffron grinned. 'Of course! Why should you men have all the fun?'

Suddenly, Gerhard's mood seemed to darken, as if a cloud had crossed the sun. 'Ah, poor Chessi. I still feel bad about her . . . That was supposed to be the night—'

'Ssshhh!' Saffron put a finger to his lips to silence him. Francesca von Schöndorf had been her dearest school friend. They were a pair, Chessi and Saffy: one a sweet, sensible German girl, the other a barely tamed child of Africa, newly arrived in England after being brought up in the Kenyan highlands. More than once, Saffron had gone to Germany to stay with the von Schöndorfs, watching the country change before her eyes as the Nazis recreated an entire nation in their twisted image.

At Christmas, when Saffron was on vacation from Oxford University, staying with relatives in Scotland, Chessi had written to her. The letter explained that she would be in St. Moritz for the New Year, hosting a chalet party at which she expected the man she loved would propose to her. Saffron had dashed across Europe as much because she wanted to be with her friend and share her joy as for the thrill of the Cresta Run. She had no idea that the love of her life would be waiting for her, still less that he would be the man Chessi expected to marry.

But love is ruthless and will not be denied.

'You and Chessi weren't meant to be together,' Saffron said. 'If you were, you would not have met me, and even if you had met me, you'd have picked me up, dusted me down and gone on your way. And I wouldn't have given you a second thought.'

'And then, when we met again, at the party that night . . . ?'

'Then we would have taken a second to recognise one another, and laughed about what had happened, and you would have told Chessi the story and she would have laughed too. None of us would have taken it the slightest bit seriously, because it wouldn't have been serious. You would have been made for Chessi. But you weren't, you were made for me. And . . . Oh!'

Saffron squealed as a gust of wind blew her hat from her head, and the two of them ran down the Grande Allée, laughing like children as they chased after the tumbling confection of black felt and sunny silk flowers.

The happiness stayed with them for the rest of the afternoon. They stopped in front of the Eiffel Tower to have their picture taken by one of the photographers who plied their trade there.

'Where would monsieur wish me to send the finished print?' the snapper asked.

'We're staying at the Ritz.'

The man looked at this gilded couple and smiled. 'But of course.'

They dined at La Tour d'Argent and looked out at the lights of the riverboats on the Seine as they ate the pressed duck for which the restaurant was famous. As was the custom, the proprietor, Monsieur Téraïl, presented them with numbered postcards as certificates of their meal.

Afterwards, pleasantly drowsy from the champagne cocktail that had preceded her meal and the bottle of 1921 Cheval Blanc that had accompanied the duck, Saffron had rested her head against Gerhard and teased him affectionately.

'I want to go sleep,' she mumbled. 'I'm too tired for hanky-panky.'

Gerhard nodded, frowning with exaggerated thoughtfulness. 'Hmm, I think that's wise. You've had a long day. You should get

some rest. You won't mind if I put you to bed and go out on the town, will you? I hear the dancing girls at the Folies Bergère are particularly pretty this year.'

'Beast!' She pouted and slapped him lazily.

They went back to their suite, paying no attention to its elegant cream, beige and gold decorations. They dashed without a second glance past the high glass doors, through which a balcony looked across the Ritz's magnificent garden to the city beyond. There would be time enough in the morning to snuggle on one of the silk-upholstered sofas, or enjoy the view.

Saffron kicked off her shoes, yanked her dress over her head and threw it to the ground without the slightest concern for its delicate chiffon fabric. She unhooked her bra and stepped out of her French knickers, laughing as she gave them one last flick with her toes and sent them flying towards Gerhard, a missile of white satin. She kept her stockings on, knowing how her man loved the contrast of colour and feel.

She threw herself onto the bed and then arranged herself artfully, sitting with her back resting on the pillows propped up against the headboard, brazen and unashamed as she turned her eyes towards Gerhard. He was unbuttoning his shirt with maddening deliberation, one button at a time, gradually revealing his chest, lightly furred with golden hair. Then she could see the ridges of muscle on his stomach. Gerhard looked at her, enjoying her gaze. He paused, his eyes examining every inch of her, and she felt the heat rising within her, the melting beginning.

His smile broadened. He knew what he was doing to her. But she could see as he undid his belt and opened the top button of his trousers that she was having an equally potent effect on him. He took his trousers off.

*Good boy*, Saffron thought as she saw that his socks had already been removed.

And then he was on her, and in her, and she felt completed by him, as though they were two halves of one single organism. Her moans turned to screams and she gave herself over, body and soul, to the man she loved, as he gave himself to her.

Later, when they were sated and Saffron was lying in his arms, idly running her fingers through the hair on his chest, Gerhard said, 'This will be the last time we can be together, my darling . . . before the storm breaks.'

Saffron felt an icy shock. She wrapped her arms around him, as if she could force him to stay with her. 'Don't say that.'

'The Führer won't stop at Austria and Czechoslovakia. There's all the old Prussian land that was given to Poland. He wants it back. He'll use Danzig as the excuse, you wait and see.'

'Let him have it then. What difference does it make to us?'

Gerhard shrugged. 'None . . . except that Chamberlain and Daladier have promised the Poles that Britain and France will respect their borders.'

'Won't that stop Hitler going in?'

'Why would he stop? He's got away with it so many times before. The British and French have always backed down. He'll assume they'll do it again.'

'What about the Russians? They won't like the German border getting any closer to the Soviet Union.'

'I don't know . . . But I can tell you this: my dear brother Konrad is strutting round telling anyone who'll listen that the whole world is about to tremble. "They're going to get the Reich's iron fist in their faces" is how he likes to put it. Then he tells me to go and get my flying suit, because I'm going to need it.'

'Will he fight too, if it happens?'

'Konrad? No, not him. He'll be back in Berlin, nice and safe, with his head tucked up General Heydrich's arse, same as usual.'

Saffron couldn't help but laugh, but then she stopped herself. 'There's nothing funny about it, is there?' A moment of silence fell and then she said, 'I know it's selfish of me, with the whole world about to go up in flames, but all I can think of is: what's going to become of us?'

'I am putting a system in place with Izzy, a way for us to get letters to each other. It will be complicated and take forever for our messages to get through. But they will, I promise.'

‘Will that be safe for him?’

‘He says he’ll be fine. He spent the last war on the front line; how could he possibly be in any danger spending this one in Switzerland?’

‘They could get to him there, though, couldn’t they . . . if they found out?’

Saffron felt Gerhard’s head nodding as he said, ‘*Ja*, they could. But Izzy doesn’t care. He says it’s his repayment for me getting him out of Germany.’

Isidore Solomons had been a hero in the First World War, awarded the Blue Max, Germany’s highest award for valour. He’d returned home to Munich and taken over from his father as the von Meerbach family lawyer and their most trusted adviser.

But Solomons was a Jew and Konrad von Meerbach was a fanatical Nazi, whose passion for Adolf Hitler and all his works far outweighed any considerations of loyalty, or decency. He relieved Solomons of his duties, without notice or compensation.

Gerhard, however, was cut from a different cloth to his brother. Ashamed of the way that such a loyal retainer and friend had been treated, he had persuaded Konrad to give him five thousand Reichsmarks from the family trust by claiming that he wanted to buy a Mercedes sports car. Instead, he had given the money to Isidore Solomons, and, in so doing, enabled an entire family to escape to safety in Switzerland.

Within a day of first meeting Gerhard, Saffron had travelled with him to Zurich to meet Solomons. She heard the story from the lawyer’s mouth, saw the respect that the local Jewish community had for Gerhard, and she discovered the price that Konrad, disgusted by his ‘Jew-lover’ brother, had made him pay for the crime of possessing a conscience. Saffron understood then that here was someone who knew the difference between right and wrong, and who was willing to act on that knowledge, whatever the consequences. It made her certain in her heart and mind alike: she had chosen the right man to love.

'I like Izzy,' she said. 'It's so good of him to do this for us.'

'Believe me, he likes you too. He keeps telling me that it's his moral duty to keep us together: "You will never find another woman to match her if I don't."'

'Well, that's true. You won't.'

'And will you ever find another man to match me?'

'No . . . never. I swear. I'll always be yours.'

They made love again . . . and again for the rest of the Easter weekend. On Sunday evening, Saffron saw Gerhard off at the Gare de l'Est, where he boarded the overnight express to Berlin. She managed not to cry until the train had left the station. But then the floodgates opened as the awful truth became impossible to wish away any longer.

Her love for Gerhard von Meerbach had only just begun. But she might never see him again. She might yearn for a time when they could be with one another and build a life together in peace. She might tell herself that their love would survive and their dreams would come true, and try with all her heart to believe it. But then another voice inside her asked: *What chance is there of that?*

. . .

In less than five months, in the early hours of Friday, 1 September 1939, Hitler unleashed the forces of Nazi Germany against Poland.

Two days later, Great Britain declared war on Germany. And slaughter, suffering and horror exploded across the world.



Another April in another country, on an early spring evening in 1942. Saffron Courtney was wearing baggy black serge overalls that hid her figure. In the heel of one of her hard leather boots was concealed a small fighting knife and the button of the map pocket on her left leg was a disguised suicide pill. She leaned over the railway track and pressed the three-pound block of explosives into the hollow between the base and top rail. The block, comprised of six eight-ounce cartridges of Nobel 808, was as malleable as putty, so that Saffron could squeeze it snugly up against the metal. The night air was filled with the strong smell of almonds, the odour emanating from the nitro-glycerine-based explosives. She pushed in a length of detonating cord, onto which a one-ounce gun-cotton primer had been inserted. Once she was satisfied with its placement, she took a roll of three-quarter-inch adhesive khaki tape from her knapsack, tore a strip off with her teeth and wound it over the plastic explosive and around the track. She then tore a second strip and repeated the procedure so that there were now two strips, roughly three fingers' widths apart, holding the bomb she was making in position.

She sat back on her haunches and looked up and down the track. Then she glanced at each side of the deep cutting. It was almost nine o'clock at night, but in the north fringe of a Nazi empire that extended from the depths of the Sahara Desert to beyond the Arctic Circle, there was still enough light to see without a torch. Saffron satisfied herself that she was not being observed. For a couple of seconds she took in the peaceful, limpid beauty of a northern evening sky, its soft blue streaked with clouds in oyster colours of grey, pearl and palest pink. She breathed in air laced with the soft scent of the gorse, whose brave yellow flowers were blooming through the last patches of winter snow, and the salt and seaweed tang of the sea.

The next item out of her knapsack was a metal button that was a little under two inches in diameter. It was attached to a

wire clip, shaped like an inverted 'U'. This fitted over the rail so that the button stood proud on top of it. This device was known in the Special Operations Executive, in which Saffron served, as a 'Fog-Signal Switch' because it resembled the small, explosive-filled detonator caps that were placed on tracks as a means of alerting drivers. The pressure of the train's wheels on the device set off the explosive, which made a noise like a large firecracker. That alerted engine drivers to hazards up ahead, or, when conditions were foggy, let them know that they were nearing a station and should begin to slow down.

No railway worker or train crewman would be surprised to see that button on the track, and it would take a close inspection before they noticed that Saffron had fixed a short length of detonating cord between the button and the block of plastic explosive. When the next train passed over the Fog-Signal Switch, the detonator would initiate the chain of detonating cord, guncotton primer and main 808 charge. And all hell would break loose.

The train was carrying five hundred men of the Waffen SS and it was due in less than ten minutes. If the charge went off, it would derail the train and either kill or injure many of the men on board. More importantly, it would wreck the track and block the cutting. The close confines and precipitous granite walls that hemmed everything in would add to the time and effort required to clear and repair the track, and this would severely hamper German lines of communications.

'Now listen here, Courtney,' her commanding officer, Lieutenant Colonel J. T. 'Jimmy' Young had told her, a week earlier. 'Your language skills aren't quite up to long-term undercover operations. Not yet, at any rate. But this mission should be right up your street. It's a simple in-out affair. Take a look at this.'

He spread a map across the chart table that dominated one side of his spartan office. 'You'll be catching the Shetland Bus,' he began, referring to the fleet of converted fishing trawlers, bristling with hidden machine guns that took agents across the

North Sea. 'They'll drop you at the entrance to this long inlet at 05.00, roughly half an hour before sunrise. Paddle due east, inland. You'll have your compass and the first light of the sun to guide you, so paddle towards the light, aim for the mountains on the horizon and you can't go wrong.'

'Don't worry, sir, I'll find my way to shore.'

'That's the spirit. Now, your landing point is this little bay here . . .' Young pointed at a spot on the map marked 'A'. 'It's unoccupied and the nearest Jerry observation post is way back along the coast, so you should be able to get in unobserved.'

He passed her a black-and-white aerial photograph. 'This was taken last week by RAF reconnaissance. It'll give you an idea of the lay of the land.'

'The key thing you have to do at this point is dispose of the dinghy. Can't have Jerry spotting it and getting wind of your presence. Two options: first, get out your knife, puncture the hull and sink it offshore. Then wade in. Of course, that's all very well if it stays on the bottom, but we don't want a semi-deflated dinghy floating ashore, looking sorry for itself, where anyone might see it.'

'Absolutely not, sir.'

There was a hint of amusement in Saffron's voice and Young paused and fixed her with a tough, inquisitive look. He had spent his life commanding, as he put it, 'hairy-arsed fighting men' and was having to adjust to the idea that a significant proportion of his new subordinates were soft-skinned, sweet-smelling young women, who might not look or sound like an average Army squaddie but who were, when properly trained, every bit as deadly. She had cut her hair shorter for easier disguise, and there was a flinty, lean composure about her, but she still retained a compelling femininity when her blue eyes blazed in a smile.

'I'm sorry, sir,' Saffron said. 'But I couldn't help thinking of that sad little boat with all the air gone out. You painted such a wonderful picture.'

Young grunted sceptically, though Saffron knew that he was rather pleased by her compliment. She also knew that his gruff exterior concealed a decent, sensitive man, who cared deeply about his agents, even as he was sending them on missions from which some were unlikely to return.

‘My point, Courtney, is that you’ll need rocks of some sort to weigh the dinghy down. Impossible for us to know if there’ll be any lying around when you get there, d’you see?’

‘Yes, sir.’

‘Second option: you’ll see from the photograph your landing point has a narrow beach with thickets of some kind of brush or gorse growing on the landward side. Those bushes may make a better hiding place, once the boat has been deflated. It’s up to you to use your initiative and make a judgement on the spot.’

‘I understand, sir.’

‘Good show. Now, once you’re ashore and the boat has been disposed of, make your way across country to Point B, here.’

He jabbed the map with his index finger. Point B was south-east of Point A and a short way inland. ‘Distance is only four miles, but no need to rush it. Hilly terrain, virtually no tree cover, main thing is to avoid being spotted and avoid injury. No bloody use to anyone if you’re hopping along on one leg, or broken an arm, that sort of thing. Should still be plenty of time to rest, eat and familiarise yourself with the area before you get to work.’

‘Yes, sir.’

‘Observe the line of the railway, here. Note how it follows the coast, with a few detours further inland, cutting through any hills that come down to the sea. This is the only line along the coast and there are no roads to speak of, certainly none that would allow the easy movement of lorries and artillery pieces, let alone tanks. If we can break that line, it will seriously hamper Jerry’s ability to respond to anything we do. He won’t be able to manoeuvre his forces or send in reinforcements.’

Saffron knew better than to ask what ‘anything we do’ might refer to. Instead she inquired, ‘Would you like me to blow the line, sir?’

Now it was Jimmy Young’s turn to be amused. ‘You sound as if you’re asking me whether I would like another slice of cake. And the answer is yes, Miss Courtney, I would like you to blow that line. In fact, I am ordering you to do so.’ He looked back at the map. ‘Right here, in this cutting, just as a trainload of Herr Himmler’s finest goons comes rolling by, at approximately 22.00 hours on the night of the fifteenth, precisely one week from today.’

Young passed Saffron two more reconnaissance photos: one showed the cutting and the surrounding landscape, the other was an extreme close-up. He explained that the line was used by civilian as well as military traffic. ‘There’s a passenger train that passes by that spot at approximately 20.45. We do not want that to be blown to kingdom come. Can’t have the citizens of an occupied country thinking of us as the enemy. Wait for it to go by before you place the explosives on the line. When the troop train passes, stay long enough to be sure that the charge has exploded. If it has, do not wait one second more to examine the effects. The flyboys will do that in the morning and we’ll have the pictures long before you could possibly get back here. Wait for the bang, hear the bang, then run. Got that?’

‘What if the charge does not explode?’

‘It will explode, because these charges always explode if properly assembled and positioned, and you will do your job, won’t you, Courtney?’

‘Yes, sir.’

‘Then you must focus all your energies on making good your escape. Your pick-up point is approximately two miles from the cutting . . . here.’ Young pointed at a spot marked ‘C’ a few miles further down the coast from Saffron’s landing site. Together, Points A, B and C formed the three corners of a shallow triangle.

Another black-and-white print was passed across the chart table. It showed a cove with two rocky promontories on either side and a small patch of beach at its head with flatter, grassy ground behind it. On one side there was a path through the rocks that led to steps down to a jetty that stuck out into the cove.

‘A member of the local Resistance, with a fast motorboat, will moor beside that jetty at 23.30. He will wait until midnight. You have a half-hour window in which to make good your escape. If you get to him in time, he will take you out to sea to rendezvous with another trawler that will bring you home.

‘If for some reason the rendezvous is impossible, and you have no other means of survival, you can contact the local Resistance as follows: go to the bar of the Hotel Armor – it’s in the town down the line from the cutting – speak to the chap behind the bar, say, “Is Mrs Andersen in? I have a message from her niece.”

‘The barman will reply, “Do you mean Julie?” To which you reply, “No, her other niece, Karin.” He will take it from there. But Courtney, let me be frank, you must only make contact if you have absolutely no alternative. Don’t want to risk you leading Jerry to our people.’

Saffron nodded. She had understood from the moment she signed on for this work that her life was expendable. The security of an entire Resistance network was more important than her individual survival.

But she could at least make the enemy pay a price for her death. And now the time had come. Saffron gave the bomb and its switch one final check. Satisfied that all was well, she stepped away from the track and walked as calmly as possible (for nothing would catch a passing German eye, or provoke suspicion more surely than someone running along the railway line) to the end of the cutting. Then she doubled back on herself, but this time walking along a path that ran up the side of the hill through which the railway had been cut, until she reached a spot a short way down the line from where she had positioned

her bomb. It was close enough to get a good view without being within range of the blast, or any flying debris.

The spot offered two other attractions. It was on the seaward side of the line, making her getaway easier. And it was one of the few places where there were trees growing, right up to the edge of the man-made precipice. Tucked away between the trunks of two pines, wearing a black woollen skull-cap and her face covered in black war-paint, she could observe proceedings with minimal risk of being spotted by anyone down on the track.

Then she heard German voices, and footsteps pounding: at least a dozen men, by the sound of it. A sickly chill gripped her stomach as she realised that they were coming along the path that ran past her position, a few yards from where she now was.

They were heading straight towards her. And they were running. Running hard.

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Saffron thanked her lucky stars for the pines that screened her position from the path and for the training she had received in concealment. But no matter how well she hid, there was still a sunless grey light in the sky and anyone who looked hard would surely spot her. Even worse, the more distance she put between her and the path, the closer she was to the edge of the cutting, and the more vulnerable to any prying eyes below.

As she pressed herself against the base of one of the tree trunks, the fear of discovery tore at her while a flurry of questions nagged, like yapping, biting hounds: *Do they know I'm here? Has someone betrayed me? But who?*

The Germans were getting closer. Their voices were more distinct and she could make out what they were saying.

Suddenly it dawned on her. These men were not a patrol, out looking for her. They were on a training run and the voices were those of their leader, shouting, 'Come on, lads! No slacking! Keep up at the back!' to the accompaniment of a low rumble of

complaints and one cheeky, or simply desperate, soldier calling out, 'Give us a break, sarge! We're dying back here!'

Saffron knew that feeling. In the past twelve months she had been on countless runs at every hour of the day and night, and each one had taken her to the brink of collapse and then beyond. And always the message was the same: 'You're stronger than you think. You can keep going longer, run faster than you believe possible, reach the point where you know you will die if you take another step . . . and keep running nonetheless.'

She almost felt sorry for the runners. But then she remembered that they were the enemy and would hunt her down mercilessly at the slightest inkling of her presence.

She became aware of the deafening pounding of her heart and the rasping of her breath, and she forced herself to calm her pulse and clear her mind.

They were almost on her, no more than twenty yards away . . . then ten.

A rabbit, frightened by the men's approach, burst out of the undergrowth on the far side of the path. It raced across the bare earth, right in front of the onrushing, boot-clad feet, and hurtled into the shelter of the trees towards Saffron.

The men must have seen it. Their eyes would have followed the rabbit into the pines. They would be looking straight at Saffron's hiding place.

But then the rabbit stopped, catching the smell of another human and dashed away again, back out onto the path, and Saffron heard the men's laughter as they followed the animal's frantic attempts to escape.

They passed right by Saffron and she heard one man say, 'I wouldn't mind some rabbit stew for dinner,' and another answer, 'Mmm . . . The way my mum used to make, with beans soaked overnight and spices and . . .'

The rest of the recipe was lost as they disappeared down the path. The evening calm was restored and Saffron returned her attention to the railway track. The last traces of light had vanished



from the sky and she was less nervous than she had expected to be. The fact that the runners had not spotted her felt like a good omen, a sign from above that all would be well. Her only worry was the bomb itself, but she knew that there was no rational basis for that. She had assembled and positioned the device correctly. The Fog-Signal Switch was absolutely reliable. The detonator cord and the Nobel 808 were both in perfect condition.

*It will work, you know it will.*

Time passed. Saffron looked at her watch: 10.15. She frowned. This was German-occupied territory. And German trains were never late.

*Where is the damn thing?*

And then, in the distance, she heard the whistle blow and a little while later the puffing of the steam engine and the clackety-clack of steel wheels on the line.

The bomb was in position.

She could see the train approaching the cutting, a dark shadow, blacked out to avoid being spotted by enemy aircraft. Saffron thought of all the times her father had taken her hunting as a girl at Lusima, her family's estate in the Kenyan Highlands. Watching the quarry approach, she felt the same sense of excitement and anticipation as she had done then, yet there was a tinge of melancholy, too. Death was approaching. True, there was a difference between killing a noble, untamed creature or soldiers fighting for a dictator who wanted to crush the world beneath his jackboot heel. But they were young men and not so different, as people, from all the others who wore British, or Canadian, or American uniforms. Saffron knew that Germany's rulers were vile, wicked men, but she also knew that there were German men who were decent, kind, and far from the stereotype of the thick-necked Nazi thug.

One of them was the man she loved.

There would be other men, with other girls who loved them, sitting aboard that train. And now it was her job to kill and maim as many of them as possible.

The moon was almost full that night but it had been hidden behind a patch of cloud. The veil vanished and a silvery wash of moonlight illuminated the train as it entered the cutting. It was making good speed, meaning that the crash, when it came, would be even more devastating.

Saffron looked towards the Fog-Signal Switch. It was less than two inches across but it seemed as wide as a soup plate.

Her heart skipped a beat as the train driver leaned out of his cabin to look up the line. The switch was so obvious, right there on the track.

He would see it. He would slow down.

But then he popped his head back inside the cab.

Two seconds later the train passed over the Fog-Signal Switch.

Everything had gone to plan.

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Saffron leaped into the woods, her hands over her ears, suddenly terrified of the carnage she had inflicted on human lives, the shockwave that would surely fling her into oblivion. The noises in her head were so shrill they were hallucinatory, so intense that she could hear high-pitched screams, and she hoped to God they weren't coming from her own mouth. She could imagine the scene of devastation and bloodshed down below her in the cutting as the train careered off the tracks and the carriages behind it slewed and bucked and smashed into one another. The men aboard would have been taken unaware. They'd have been hurled about the compartments, slammed against walls, doors and seats, or thrown out of the windows against the brutally hard granite that rose on either side, their bones broken, their limbs unnaturally twisted.

All this she could picture in her mind's eye. But any thought about what she had done swiftly gave way to her own immediate danger. Her senses focused on the ground in front of her and she began running for her life.

In the days after Jimmy Young had informed Saffron of her mission, she had pored over maps and photographs until she knew every path, every field, every sheltering copse and every bare expanse of open ground between the cutting and the cove, with the arm of its jetty pointing to freedom. She knew where she was going as she ran through the night, and she was not taken unaware by the springy ground, perforated with dips and holes that could easily twist an ankle or break a leg, or the cruel protrusions of rock that lurked beneath moss or wildflowers. She was used to land like this, every SOE agent was, and her feet instinctively adjusted to the rise and fall of the ground on which her steps landed.

She was about a third of the way towards her destination when she had to slow down to work her way around a village. It cost her almost fifteen minutes, but she had allowed for that when mapping out her route. But there were some things for which no one could plan, such as almost running into a German soldier and a local girl making love behind a hedge.

The first clue Saffron had to their presence was a female voice asking, 'Why did you stop?' and a man answering, 'I thought I heard something.'

Saffron dropped to the ground.

'I should go and look,' the soldier said.

Through the foliage that was all that separated her from the lovers, Saffron saw a hand – so close that she could almost touch it – reach to pick up a rifle. She moved her right hand down her body until she felt the handle of the Fairbairn-Sykes fighting knife that lay in its scabbard against her hip. The knife had a needle-sharp pointed blade that made it a deadly stabbing weapon, but the sides of the blade were as keen as razors and could slice through human flesh like a steak knife through tender filet mignon.

Saffron was not afraid of being shot. She had been trained in combat techniques more deadly than the average infantryman could imagine. She could kill that German soldier before he knew she was there. But then there was the girl. She would have

to be eliminated too, before she could scream. Saffron knew that the girl would be too shocked to make any sound for a second or two, which was more than enough time to deal with her. But it was one thing to kill an enemy combatant and another to murder an unarmed female civilian, even a collaborator. And, all moral considerations aside, she would be left with two dead bodies to dispose of.

If the soldier looked over the hedge, Saffron would have to fight. She tensed herself, ready to spring at him. But she heard the girl say, 'Don't be silly. It's probably just an animal – a fox or a badger, or something.' Then her tone changed and became more ingratiating as she purred, 'Come back here. I miss you . . .'

Saffron saw the man stop moving. He was torn, she could tell, between his lust and his sense of duty.

'I really liked what you were doing, it felt soooo good,' the girl sighed.

The rifle fell to the ground. The soldier went back to the girl. Saffron prayed that he was a terrible, inconsiderate lover. *Get a move on. Get what you want. Button up your trousers and go!*

But now of all times she had to bump into a Casanova in uniform. He put his heart into it. He paid attention to his partner. Whatever he was doing, it was working because the girl was being aroused to such ecstasy that he had to clamp his hand over her mouth to stop her from screaming. Saffron felt a brief twinge of jealousy. It had been a long time since she had known pleasure like that.

Five minutes passed, then ten. Saffron considered trying to make her getaway while lover-boy still had his pants down, but if he heard another rustle in the hedgerow he would be bound to investigate.

But finally the mutual passion reached its climax and, to Saffron's surprise, it was the girl who promptly stood, pulled up her underwear and said, 'Better be off, then. My mother will be wondering what's become of me.'

She started walking away, followed by the soldier asking, 'When can I see you again?' and at last Saffron could move.

She told herself there was plenty of time and that she didn't want to arrive too early and have to shelter among the rocks until the Resistance man and his boat arrived. The moon was still out and there was enough light to see where she was going.

Saffron's spirits rose; she was elated. Her mission had been a success and she was half a mile from the cove. Maybe she would get away with it after all. And then she heard a howling sound. For a second she was plunged into a dark fantasy world of witches, wolves and malice, but an instant later she had reined in her fevered imagination and realised that it was dogs.

The hunting hounds had been unleashed, and she was their quarry.

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Saffron ran hard, away from the direct route to the cove. She knew that there was a stream no more than three or four hundred yards ahead, which she could use to put them off her scent. By the time they picked it up again, she might be able to make it to the cove, meet the waiting boat and get away.

The water was snow-melt and icy cold. She ran downstream, slipping on slimy, moss-covered rocks on the stream bed but keeping her balance and maintaining her pace, even if she was being taken further off her course, for the stream met the sea some way north of the cove. The stream ran along a gully, whose bush-and tree-lined banks provided Saffron with some shelter from the hounds and the German soldiers who were following. Soon she would have to get back onto dry land again and turn towards the cove. She glanced upwards. The night sky was smeared with clouds, but none of them seemed to be passing over the moon, which remained gloriously isolated, reflecting its glow onto the earth.

If she wanted concealment, she needed to find a hiding place and stay there, in which case she would miss the boat. But to reach the cove in time, she would have to risk being seen. Her only hope was speed. She had to open a gap that her pursuers

could not close and pray that the Resistance man had the nerve to wait for her, even though he would see that the Germans were on her tail, and that his motorboat was fast enough to escape before the enemy's guns could blow them both to pieces.

She kept running, taking the single-lane road, no more than a track that twisted along the coastline, serving the farms and fishing hamlets in the area. It struck her that it had been a few minutes since she had heard the barking of the dogs, but no sooner had the thought occurred than she caught the sound of them drifting over the still night air, faintly audible over the gentle susurration of the sea against the shore.

*Run faster! Come on, you lazy cow . . . run faster!*

Now Saffron understood why her training had been so brutal and her instructors so merciless. They had been preparing her for a moment such as this, when her life depended on being able to push herself onwards and increase her speed when her lungs were screaming for mercy, her heart felt ready to burst and the muscles in her legs were cramping as lactic acid seeped into them past the pain barrier and beyond.

There was a turning off the road up ahead of her to the right: a track that ran downhill towards a large house that was set back a few hundred yards from the cove, screened from the sea by windblown trees that some long-dead owner must have planted as windbreaks. Saffron had planned to work her way discreetly around the property but it was too late for that now.

She sprinted downhill, then left the track before it arrived in front of the house. Here she scrambled over an ornamental rockery, through which artfully constructed paths, linked by stone steps, wound down the steepest slope of the hill. Once these would have provided agreeably civilised strolls for gentle summer afternoons. Now she was fleeing for her life over the rocks and plants, leaping down the steps three at a time, with enemies and their animals hot on her heels. She emerged from the rockery, almost at sea level, and turned onto a rough path that ran between the beds of a vegetable garden.

The dogs were much louder and Saffron could hear the guttural commands of their handlers. A flash of light behind her caught her eye and she glanced back to see a bedroom window opening on the first floor and the silhouette of someone looking out. But then the window closed and the light went out. Whoever was in there, they didn't want to get involved.

Saffron came to the trees at the end of the vegetable patch, ran across a patch of open ground and discovered a chest-high, barbed-wire fence, marking the perimeter of the property. She stopped, her chest heaving, wondering if she could get over it.

She looked to either side. About ten yards away was a metal gate, facing the sea, held shut by a chain. She ran to it, clambered over and landed on the soft, tussocky sea-grass on the far side.

Saffron could see the cove. The grass spread down to the beach, exactly as the aerial reconnaissance photograph had suggested. She looked to the left, towards the rocks and the steps down to the jetty.

There was no boat.

But then she saw a shadow rising above the line of the jetty. It was a man, and he was beckoning towards her. Of course! He'd moored the boat on the far side, out of sight.

Saffron picked up her speed again. She could hear the dogs on the far side of the fence, barking furiously, but knew that by the time their handlers caught up with them and forced the gate open it would be too late, she'd be on the boat.

*I'm going to make it!*

As she raced forward, her right foot skidded. Where there should have been firm earth beneath the grass, waterlogged mud was sucking at her leg. She fought to free herself and realised that what appeared to be grassland from the air was actually a marsh. There had to be a path through it to the shore, but she had lost it and the only way to find it again would be to head back to the gate and start again.

But that would take her into the arms of the Germans.

Desperately she tried to struggle on, but her progress was painfully slow. She could never tell whether she would be stepping onto dry land, or watery mud, or a hard, roughly shaped piece of rock.

‘Over here!’ the man by the jetty shouted. She could see him pointing to her left. That must be the path.

She turned and floundered towards it.

‘Come on!’ the man shouted.

Saffron heard a burst of gunfire behind her.

The Germans had shot the chain that held the gate.

There was a clamour of shouts and barks, and the rumble of an engine being revved.

The boatman called out to her in desperation. ‘Quick, quick!’

The crump of a flare gun being fired echoed across the cove and it burst above Saffron’s head, casting a blinding white glare over the entire scene.

She saw the bearded face of her rescuer, a cap on his head, a fisherman’s sweater. And then he ducked behind the jetty again and the next thing she knew the boat was racing away across the cove, heading for the open water, and she had to throw herself into the morass of grass and mud and salt water as guns chattered and tracer bullets sparked through the air towards the fleeing vessel.

The gunfire died away, though the sound of the engine disappearing into the distance told Saffron that the Resistance man had got away. She was glad of that. She would not have his death on her conscience.

Saffron dragged herself to her feet.

No more than ten yards away, eight men wearing German army windbreakers were standing, their guns pointed at her, while their dogs paced to and fro, snarling angrily and casting hungry stares in Saffron’s direction.

One of the soldiers had a lieutenant’s insignia sewn onto his sleeve. He pointed towards Saffron and ordered two of his men to get her while the others kept them covered.



Saffron had her knife and her pistol. If she could move, or take cover, or had the element of surprise on her side, she might have fought it out. But she was stuck up to her shins in mud, without shelter, and she knew that the enemy was armed with MP40 submachine guns – ‘*Schmeissers*’, her instructors had called them – capable of firing 500 rounds a minute. By the time she had reached for her gun they would have torn her body to shreds.

Perhaps she should make the move and get herself killed. That way they couldn’t torture her and she couldn’t give away what little she knew about the Resistance movement. But something stopped her. It wasn’t that she was afraid to die, more that she refused to give up. As long as she was alive there was always the chance she could find a way to escape. All her life she had never let anything or anyone beat her.

Even as the soldiers’ hands grabbed her, pulled her from the swamp and dragged her towards the path, Saffron clung to her self-belief. *They haven’t beaten me yet.*

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Saffron was taken to the large country house that she knew had been appropriated by the SS. ‘It’s a branch office for all their various police operations,’ Jimmy Young had told her. ‘Criminal Police, Secret Police and the SD: the Nazi Party’s own intelligence agency. In practice there’s a lot of overlap, particularly in the occupied territories. They’re all equally unpleasant.’

They took her gun, her knife, her bag and all its contents. They stripped her naked and left her that way for three hours in an unheated underground cell, lit by a bare bulb, with no furniture, no privacy and nothing but a tin pot in which to relieve herself.

There was an opening in the door through which the guards could look into the room, covered by a small slat that slid open or closed. The guards made no secret of opening it and looking at her on a regular basis.