

Walking Away from Midnight

Book One of The Midnight Series

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DEDICATION

When I started writing this book, I took ill and was diagnosed with Lymphoplasmacytic Lymphoma, basically, cancer of the blood. What followed was a battle with cancer that lasted two years and is still ongoing to this day, Wednesday, May 15th 2024. Although I have been given the all-clear, my medical team is still *mopping-up*.

During this medical crisis, I managed to continue writing this book. And now, at the end of my cancer treatment, I'm at the end of writing, editing and proofing this book. I'm about to launch this book on an unsuspecting world, and I'm dedicating it to the following people who helped me on my cancer journey.

My wife, Jo, who held my hand all the way through, and is still holding my hand.

My medical team at the Evangelismos Hospital in Paphos, Cyprus. Dr Maria and her staff, who made life at the end of a chemotherapy drip a little more bearable, and strived to make the multiple bone marrow aspirations a little less painful.

To those who have started their cancer journey, those in the middle of their long cancer journey, those who have beaten cancer, and the families of those who despite everything, succumbed to that dreadful disease.

And lastly, my good friends in real life and on social media, i.e., X, or Twitter as I still call it, who made me rally myself, stand tall, and go forward with a smile.

This book is dedicated to you all.

Thank you for being there when I needed you most.

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Chapter One

The Midnight Lake

The Midnight Lake, French Ardennes, May 1926

“It’s too dark. I don’t like it,” the little girl shouted.

The girl’s mother clucked as mother hens do. “You can do this, Jessie. It’s only dark water from the peat. It won’t hurt you.”

“It’s too cold, Mummy. And slimy.”

“But you’ve got your plimsolls on. And shorts and a singlet. You can’t be cold, Jessie. The sun is very warm.”

Ruth Fordham’s nine-year-old stood, hands on hips, defiant and not happy with standing in the cold, dark water.

“It’s not normal. The water’s black,” Jessie shouted.

“Jessie, if anyone is getting cold, it’s me,” Ruth Fordham said, a note of exasperation in her voice. She was beginning to shiver herself. She wore similar clothing to her daughter. She was knee deep in the Midnight Lake’s dark, peaty water. It was indeed cold but wouldn’t be if she could move around. Instead, she had spent the last twenty minutes persuading her young daughter to get in the water and learn to swim. But no. Jessie had made her mind up and there was nothing anyone could do now to change the girl’s mind.

"I'm going back to the house," Jessie announced, turning, and running away.

"No. No, you're not," her mother shouted back. "Stay where you are, Jessie. Wait for me," Ruth shouted, trying to walk out of the lake with frozen legs and slipping on a few slimy boulders.

She's right about it being cold and slimy.

By the time Ruth had extricated herself from the lake, there was no sign of Jessie.

"Jessie. Jessie, where are you? Come here and we will walk back to the house together." Ruth waited for a reply, but there was none.



Jessie had no idea why she ran and no idea where she was going. All she knew was that she desperately wanted not to go into the black water. It didn't seem natural. So, she ran away. Although he wasn't there, she could hear her father admonishing her.

"Always running away, Jessie. Never standing your ground."

Jessie stopped running and looked about. The gardens round the house and lake were new to the entire Fordham family. It hadn't been long since her parents had bought the property and this was only the second time they had been to the Midnight Lake. That fact, even at her young age, soon became very evident to Jessie as she realised, she had no idea where she was, let alone how to get back to where she wanted to be.

Even worse, it was getting dark. Jessie was not just a precocious child; she was also easily scared. She was alone, in a strange land, with night falling.

Are there dangerous animals in France?

It was a rhetorical question that had no answer. Jessie didn't even know if there were dangerous animals at home in England.

She realised she had to find shelter in case it rained and somehow keep warm. Shorts and a singlet were not going to keep her warm during the coming night. And it would be a long and cold night if her mother didn't find her.

Jessie started walking with all these thoughts running through her head. She was paying little attention to where she was placing her feet, which accounted for her missing her footing and falling down a small gully. Jessie came to a slithering halt as she hit her head on a rock and lost consciousness. Entangled in weeds, roots, and fallen leaves, these covered her slim body forming a natural barrier against the elements. Jessie didn't know it, but if she had she would have found it amusing that she was as snug as a bug in a rug.



"She's been out there for hours, Albert," Ruth shouted down the telephone. "She's only nine years old," she added, weeping at the same time as shouting.

"I know," Albert's tinny voice came over the phone. "I'll be there as fast as I can. But I'm in Paris for this important meeting. You know I cannot shirk this responsibility. There are those who have put a lot of time and effort into this. Me getting this job will be the pinnacle of their achievement."

All Ruth could do was nod her head and whisper, "I know. I know what's at stake. But Jessie..."

"Call the local police and the mayor. See if they can do something to help."

"I will," Ruth said, placing the receiver quietly on the telephone cradle. Ruth Fordham wiped away the tears and wondered how she could find the telephone number for anyone. She had no telephone directory and couldn't speak French. No. it was up to her to find her daughter.



Ruth picked up the old rucksack, one belonging to somebody who once lived at their summer home and opened the clips. She looked inside and found nothing but a few crumpled French sweet wrappers. Crushed leaves and cobwebs. She turned it upside down and shook the contents out.

She then placed inside a battery torch, matches, candles, two boiled eggs, cheese, bread, and a small pottery flagon of water. If she were to get lost, or even find Jessie, but were both then lost, at least they would not starve and would have water.

Before leaving the house, Ruth made sure her twin sons were asleep and ensured the housekeeper and cook, Madame Noaire, knew what to do. She looked about and wondered which way would be the best way to go. Madame Noaire's husband, Maurice, was already out looking for Jessie. She hadn't asked him to help and had no idea where he was looking, but she had no choice but to go and look herself. Sitting and waiting was not something she could do.

Ruth Fordham walked down the cinder patch from the front door, turned toward the lake, and tried to retrace her steps.



Jessie woke up, slowly opening her eyes to let in the watery light of a misty Ardennes late evening and screamed. She was looking directly into a skull. She had seen skulls before, in a pirate themed picture book, but this was something else, something real.

Jessie pushed herself backwards, away from the grinning skull, and realised she was surrounded by at least three gravestones. Gravestones meant more skulls; more dead people and a place where Jessie didn't want to spend any time. She screamed and then screamed again when a large hand pressed down onto her shoulder.



"I cannot thank you enough," Ruth Fordham said as Maurice Noaire handed over a limp, but alive, Jessie to her tender care. "Where was she?"

"Near the burial site of the original owners. The couple who created this paradise, along with their little boy, all died from an outbreak of plague. They were buried close to the lake. Sometime later, many years later, headstones were added."

Ruth took Jessie and placed her on the sofa in what was to become her husband's office.

"How are you feeling, Jessie?"

Jessie looked up at her mother through half-closed eyes. "I'm cold, tired, and hungry. More hungry than cold and tired."

"What would you like to eat?"

"I have chicken soup with lentils and beans in the kitchen. Would you like a large bowl, with fresh bread and butter?" Madame Noaire asked.

Jessie, a big fan of Madame Noaire's cooking, nodded her head, giving the cook a look of desperation.

"Very well," Madame Noaire said, turning to leave.

"And ice-cream."

Madame Noaire looked over her shoulder and winked at Jessie.

After the Noaire's had left, Ruth cradled her daughter's head and looked at the wound at the rear, close to where her ponytail started.

"Looks sore," she said.

"It is," Jessie said.

"Well, there's a bump forming but no skin breakage. You'll make a good recovery."

"I like it here," Jessie said in a matter-of-fact way, sitting up, ready to receive a large bowl of soup.

"We still need to teach you to swim. You're not getting out of that," Ruth said.

"I know. I was being silly, running away. And I got frightened by the skull. Who was it?"

"Maurice said it must have been one of the original owners. Maybe a wild dog or cat dug it up. They had been dead a long time."

"How long?"

"Hundreds of years, Jessie. In the 1600s I think."

Jessie was not certain when the 1600s where, but it certainly sounded a long time ago.

The door opened and Madame Noaire walked in with a large tray holding two bowls of soup, a plate of freshly cut bread, a plate of biscuits and two small bowls of ice-cream.

"That looks delicious," Ruth said.

Jessie said nothing, but picked up one bowl of soup, a piece of bread and dipped one in the other, pausing to take a big bite, and winked a thank you to Madame Noaire.

Madame Noaire smiled and winked back.

The door closed and Ruth and Jessie were left alone.

“You must promise me you will never run away again, no matter how bad the situation is. You must stand up, do what needs to be done and do not run away from whatever it is you fear.

Jessie dipped her bread in the soup again and took a large bite. “I wump, mummer. Pumis.”

“And another thing.”

Jessie stopped eating.

“Don’t talk with your mouthful. It’s rude. Now move over, my turn to eat before it all disappears.”

Chapter Two

A Death in the Mist

Ledbury, England May 1926

He cut the engine to his Riley Brooklands and coasted to a quiet stop. It was three in the morning in a misty, fog-bound village square in the Gloucestershire market town of Ledbury. His car creaked as the man got out and closed the door as quietly as possible.

Quietly! That's a laugh.

He pulled up the collar to his black gabardine mac and pulled his black fedora down low on his head. The black theme was completed with black trousers and shoes. He wiped a finger and thumb across his black moustache, looking at the mist crawling between the wooden beams of the centuries old Market House. It was bitterly cold, and he hated being cold. His normal environment was somewhere, anywhere, where the sun shone and winters were not so inclement as here in England. Somewhere warm, exotic, inviting and with plenty of watering holes were high on his wish list. But England in the 1920s had no such inviting places, and he was loath to even be in the country, despite having been born only a few miles down the road from his current location.

“Have you brought the money?”

The voice came from under the Market House, between the pillars of the ancient structure in the town’s high street.

“Come out where I can see you,” the man in black said.

The clip clop of riding boots was unmistakable. Someone was walking towards him from under the building. A figure emerged, swirling fog around his body made it hard for the man in black to discern if he knew who it was. A brief gust of damp air suddenly cleared the fog.

“Well,” the man in black said, “I never expected you.”

“It seems, in our line of work, we least suspect those closest to us.”

“Isn’t that the truth?”

“Have you got the money?”

“Of course. Do you think I’m stupid? Have you got the package?”

“No. I know you’re not stupid, just a little careless. Yes, I have the package, including the wheels from the device.”

“Wheels? From the machine? From an Enigma machine?”

That’s worth a lot more money to my buyer.

“Yes, wheels from the machine.”

“Show me.”

The man in the shadows fumbled in his jacket pocket and pulled out a small package. “They’re in here, along with the microfilm of the manual.”

“Microfilm. I’ve heard of that.”

“I hope your buyers know what to do with the microfilm. As to the device, if they have a working machine, things will fit into place now. It’s worth the money you’re paying us. This German code can only be broken by experts, and people with an engineering background. You will have to build a machine.”

“Paying us? Who is us? I thought you worked alone.”

A sudden echo of footsteps, heavy in the foggy air, could be heard moving closer.

"Into the alley, quickly," the shadowy man said.

The street was quiet except for the footsteps, the owner of which walked slowly past the alleyway.

Footsteps receded, and the man in black stifled a laugh.

"This is ridiculous."

"Not if you are as deadly intent on gaining a lot of money... as I am, my friend."

"I'm not your friend. Never was. You take too much on yourself and make yourself too important. You're a nobody."

"This gun in my hand says otherwise."

"Snap," the man in black said.

"But..."

A gun fired, and the echo boomed in the alleyway as another shot rang out, the bullet finding its mark. A long groan and another shot fired.

Out of the alleyway, a man stumbled, crashed against the sports car, pulled himself to the driver's door and fumbled to open it. He stopped, realised his black fedora was lost in the alleyway. He thought to retrieve it, then thought better of the move. A police officer's whistle sounded in the distance and it made up the man in black's mind. He pulled the driver's door open. With a groan through gritted teeth, he dropped into the seat of the car, slammed the door shut and started the engine. Putting the car in gear, he drove away at speed, away from the Market House and onto the Worcester road.

The alleyway swirled with a foggy sheaf as an overweight local police officer arrived, breathless from his brief run, attempting to blow his police whistle as much as possible. The effort was too much; besides, it was more to scare assailants away as he was sure he had

heard at least three gunshots. As he approached the alleyway, shining the light from his battery torch, he saw a pale hand sticking out from the alleyway. The police officer stopped and pulled out his truncheon, just to be on the safe side. The heavy piece of wood felt reassuring in his hand, but he knew it would be useless against a gun. He slowly approached and saw the body lying in the alleyway on his back, his face lit in a ghostly panorama from the policeman's flashlight and the grey glare of the fog. Next to the hand was a black hat. He assumed it belonged to the man lying in the alleyway. The officer knelt next to the prone man and felt for a pulse. There was none. The officer stood up and tutted.

"Oh, this will not do, not on my watch. Nothing like this has ever happened before." He shone his flashlight on the man's face and craned his neck to get an unobstructed view of the face. "Good god," the officer blurted out, as he recognised the man. "It can't be. Lord Hallan?"

Chapter Three

Like Father, Like Daughter

Catterick Garrison, England, June 1926

“Why are we leaving?” The girl’s question, under normal circumstances, would have been valid, but there was nothing normal about the way the British army worked. You did as you were told and you went where they sent you. And if it meant uprooting your family, so be it.

The girl’s mother smiled at her daughter, in that indulgent way mothers do. “Because the army wants daddy to work in Egypt.”

The girl sighed. She sat next to her mother on the family sofa in their army supplied house in Catterick. She looked up at her mother and smiled back. Then she looked at her father and scowled. “Why don’t you leave the army and then we can stay here.”

“It’s not as simple as that, Jessie. Besides, the army owns this house. So even if I left the army we would have to move.”

“We can live in France,” Jessie said.

“It won’t be for long, Jessie,” her mother said.

"But we liked it in France," Jessie said, almost pleading.

"The army..."

"It's always the army, daddy."

"That's who pays my wages and lets us buy such a lovely house in France."

Jessie, thoughts racing through her head, desperately trying to think of something that would make the army see sense and let them stay in Catterick. But nothing came to her.

"When are we leaving?"

Jessie's mother stroked her daughter's arm. "At the end of the week. And as a special surprise, your uncle Nev will be joining us in Egypt later in the year."

Jessie almost squealed with excitement. "Will he live with us," she shouted.

Albert smiled. "No, he will have his own quarters. But he won't be far away, so you'll see a lot of him."

Jessie clapped her hand excitedly.

"Now, we have almost finished packing everything away," Ruth Fordham said, "and in a week we will take a train to Liverpool. We sail on 15th June on *The Empress* and disembark at Aboukir Bay, Alexandria, in Egypt. Then we travel for a few hours overland to Cairo. It's going to be exciting, Jessie. A new country. New people. And you will make lots of new friends at the English school in Cairo."

Jessie looked at her mother, then again at her father. The excitement of seeing her uncle again had passed. "I think I want to go to bed. I'm tired."

After Jessie left the room to go to the bathroom, her father moved over to sit next to his wife.

"Is it me, Ruth?"

"What do you mean."

“It is so tiring, just talking to the girl. And she always runs away when things get tough. She never stands her ground.”

Ruth Fordham smiled. “She’s single minded, just like her father. As for not standing her ground, she did what any general would do when facing overwhelming odds. Retreat, re-group and fight another day. She never surrenders, just moves sideways away from the issue, for a while.”

“Not at all like you then.”

“No, she’s her father’s girl. And I’ll bet you were the same at her age.”

Albert Fordham kissed his wife on the cheek. “Time for bed, I think. We have a busy week ahead of us.”

Chapter Four

A Family Affair

Cairo, Egypt October 1929

Nev Fordham placed his chips on what he considered the winning number. He just knew the roulette table's wheel was going to stop on his number, which meant he was about to be rich. Nev didn't even consider the alternative. If he lost, he would be in debt to the biggest loan shark in Cairo, and Dio Deberge was not known to wait for his money when payments were due. His enforcers were adept at entering any premises, invited or otherwise, and removing items to the value of the debt if there was no money on-hand to pay the debt, well, they were not averse to cracking ribs, heads, even fingers should anyone desire to stop them.

But Nev Fordham was certain his ship was coming in and nothing would change his mind.

The casino, La Maison d'Or, as it was grandly called, was buzzing and Nev could feel his luck was changing. The croupier span the wheel and Nev, along with three other punters, stood and watched as mesmerised by the wheel as much as their dreams to becoming instantly rich.

Of course, occasionally punters in La Maison d'Or became rich. But if such a thing happened, they were soon relieved of their wealth.

The spinning wheel was slowing and the gaggle of punters each drew in a breath in anticipation.

The wheel slowed. They let out their breath, even more slowly.

Clatter-clatter, the small metal ball noisily announced its path across the various numbered slots on the wheel. And then it stopped and the four punters let out their breath noisily, fingers gripping the roulette table, necks craning, eyes rolling, each trying to see on what number the ball had landed on.

Nev's number was twelve red. The other three punters had all placed their bets on red as well, twenty-one, thirty and five.

The little metal ball, that giver of hope and destroyer of dreams, had landed on red, but the number was not twelve, twenty-one, thirty or five. It was seven, just two spaces down from Nev's bet.

"But that's not possible," Nev murmured, staring at the young croupier. "Amir, that is not possible."

Amir, the teenage croupier stared back, being used to destroying all punter's dreams. "Sept, rouge," he said. "I'm sorry Mister Nev. But you have lost, again."

It was a finality that left each of the punters feeling empty, bereft of anything worthwhile in their lives, their stomachs doing somersaults.

Nev felt sick.

Amir gave a brief, sorrowful smile, as he collected in the winnings for the house.

A shrill whistle blew and the entrance doors to La Maison d'Or crashed inwards, glass and wood shattering. "This is a raid on an illegal gambling house," a man in a British military uniform shouted. His cap had a red covering which singled him out as Military Police. "Stay where you are and nobody leave."

People began running, trying to escape the Military Police.

Nev looked at the croupier, then looked across at the bellowing officer. "Oh no, not you. Of all the people. Better scram, Amir."

"Scram? What is scram," the confused young man said.

"Run for it," Nev hissed. "It's my brother."

But it was too late. A burly army sergeant had made his way behind Nev and managed to grab both his and Amir's arm. "And where do you two birds think you're flying to," he said in a gruff voice.

Hearing the commotion, the officer looked across to the roulette table and recognition formed on his face, followed by a scowl and a soft groan.

"Nev. Why oh why, Nev?"

The officer walked across the brief space between the doors and the roulette table. He grabbed Nev by the left arm and pulled him toward the doors at the rear of the gambling floor.

"Come with me, Nev."

"Albert," Nev spluttered, "you cannot walk in and ruin..."

"Shut up, Nev, or I will arrest you and throw you in the slammer for a few days. You're a British officer, for heaven's sake, man. Doesn't that mean anything to you anymore?"

"But..."

"Shut up, Nev," the officer said, dragging him across the floor, between the poker, baccarat, and blackjack tables. Past the cashier's office, which seemed empty of any staff suddenly, and into the house manager's office. Again, the place was strangely empty. The British officer gave out a brief murmur as he closed the door. "Nobody at home, it seems."

"Of course not. They knew you were coming. I wish you had told me, Albert."

"Sit down, Nev."

"If only you had..."

"Sit down, Nev, or I will knock you down for putting me in such a fix."

Nev sat down. "Some brother you are."

"Nev, don't act all innocent as the driven snow. You know how it works. I only knew myself an hour ago, and I had no way of contacting you. And yes, I am supposed to be your brother and I'm about to do something that could cost me my career. And that would not please some particularly important people, would it?"

"No, I suppose not. Very well little brother, get it off your chest."

"Where did you get the money from to gamble here? And how much of it have you lost?"

Nev realised there was no way out. "Dio Deberge. Twenty thousand."

"Good."

Nev looked at his brother. "Good?"

"That's what I said. I want you to go along with whatever Deberge has in mind for you to pay him back, then offer to sell him military secrets. Our military secrets."

"And then put the hangman's noose around my neck, I suppose."

"Nev, as you rightly pointed out, I am your brother, and I would not let any harm come to you. Dio Deberge is a dealer in secrets. He lures people like you..."

"People like me. Meaning suckers."

"If that's what you want to call it. I prefer an undercover operative, playing his part in routing out a nest of spies. The lady next to you at the table. Did you not recognise her? No, of course you didn't. You were too intent on feathering your own nest. She works as a secretary for the Military Attaché at the French embassy. Next to her, a German spy and next to him an Italian spy. All selling their secrets to fuel their

gambling habits. You want to end up in a Cairo gutter with your throat slit?”

Nev shook his head.

“Didn’t think so. I’m up for Captain soon and that will soon be followed by Major. I’m moving up in Military Intelligence and I will help you, if I can, this one time. After that, Nev, dear brother, you are on your own. You get caught again and there will be little I can do for you, and those in high places will deal with you, not me. Do you understand?”

“Yes,” a sullen Nev Fordham said.

“Good. Now, back to this minor problem. Here’s what I propose we do...”

“There is another aspect to this sorry mess.”

“Tell me it isn’t another huge loan.”

“No, not a loan,” Nev said, his face flushing with embarrassment.

“I can see a showstopper here, Nev.”

“I sold something for money.”

“What? The Crown Jewels?” Albert said with a slight hint of humour in his voice. “You’re not smiling, Nev, and that worries me.”

“I sold a state secret. And yes, that makes me a traitor.”



Albert literally dragged his elder brother out of the casino, and into a waiting Super Snipe staff car.

The driver didn’t have time to open the door for his passengers and could see the anger on Albert’s face. “Where to, sir.”

“Nowhere, Thomson. Take a walk and make it at least a thirty-minute walk.”

"Yes, sir," a bemused Thomson said. He patted his camouflage jacket to make sure he had his cigarettes and matches and exited the car. As he shut the car door, he whistled a ditty he had learned on a drunken spree with an American sailor. Whistling was always an excellent choice if, like him, you could never remember the words.

Albert pushed Nev into the rear seat of the car and followed him in.

"Talk to me," was all Albert said.

"It's quite simple. I needed money to pay my gambling debts."

"Debts? How much in total?"

"Thirty thousand pounds."

"And you raised that selling British Army secrets?"

"No. I raised that, and more, selling upgrade plans for the Brown-ing M1919A2 Medium Machine Gun. Specifically, for use with cav-alry units."

"And when did you sell these plans?"

"Six months ago, and before you ask, it was to parties unknown, but I suspect they were Italian."

"So, you have been a busy bee stacking up your gambling debts. And you selling other countries' state secrets. Secrets, I might add, that will amount to nothing, as that upgrade was less than useless if memory serves."

"Correct."

"Don't look so happy about it. You've still committed an act of treason, even though it was selling secrets belonging to the Americans."

"Yes, I know. But it has a certain synergy to it, don't you think?"

Albert, twisted round on the back seat and the car's springs creaked in response. His movement made the old leather give up the aroma of Capstan full strength cigarettes. Albert made a mental note to bring that up with Thomson.

"How many times have you done this, sold secrets to pay your debts?"

"Three times. Twice, the third would have been tonight."

"Now, you are going to carry on with this transaction, but we will be listening in and we will nab Dio before any damage is done. You are officially on my payroll now, but don't expect to get paid. So, give me the lowdown."

"I'm not taking orders from you. Hallan's my boss."

"Not anymore, he's dead."

"Dead? How?"

"I don't know the full ins and outs, but what has transpired is Lord Hallan was on the pay of German intelligence."

"No. Never, not him."

"Yes him. He was trying to sell secrets to do with a new German cipher to an independent spook he thought was MI5."

"Sounds complicated. "

"It is. But not for you, not anymore. You're in my team now, brother. And we do this my way."

Chapter Five

Dio Deberge

Cairo, Egypt, October 1929

Nev, for the first time in his new career as a purveyor of other people's secrets, was nervous. Even more so when he knocked on Dio Deberge's door. The guard, eyeing him up as if he was measuring Nev for a coffin, kept a respectful silence, but was obviously ready for any eventuality.

A small window in the heavy black metal door slid to the left. A slit opened. Two eyes, like a chameleon, looked left, right, crossed back and looked at each other. Nev, fascinated, watched the eyes of Jules Mornair, flicking back and forth.

"Yes," Mornair said with some urgency.

"I need to see Dio."

"Why?"

"Mind your own business, Jules. You're his bookkeeper, not his nanny."

The small slit disappeared as Mornair shut the metal panel with a clang. The door's bolt was opened, locks were unlocked and eventually the full door opened with a squeal, reminiscent of a mouse caught in a cat's mouth.

Nev stepped into the room and the door squealed once more as it shut behind him.

“This way,” Mornair said as he passed on Nev’s left.

Nev nodded and followed the diminutive Mornair, who limped his way slowly through the labyrinth of corridors and rooms that were Dio’s private rooms and public meeting places. An eclectic mix of pleasure, danger, and downright peril pervaded the building. The clientele, workers, entertainers, and other offshoots that made up Dio’s entourage were scurrying around, making sure they did their jobs adequately, and that nobody had any reason to complain to Dio about them. One complaint usually meant the person lost their job, if they were lucky, or lost their life if they were not so lucky.

“Nev! My dear friend, how are you?” The voice boomed out and unmistakably showed an Egyptian attempting to create a clipped English accent. It didn’t work, Dio Deberge had been told this many times. But still he persisted. It was his only affectation. He maintained his attempts at becoming that which he was not born to be. Part of the British aristocracy.

Nev followed Mornair into Dio’s inner sanctum where the big Egyptian was sprawled across the biggest throne room chair Nev had ever seen outside of Britain.

“New throne, my friend. What do you think? Biggest you have seen, I bet.”

Nev nodded. “Impressive, Dio. Where did you find it?”

“Find? Not find, dear Nev. I saw it at my friend’s place. He had brought it in from a German loot stashed somewhere in the desert. I give ‘im a decent price. He happy. I’m happy.”

“Everybody is happy,” Nev said with a smile.

“Maybe, maybe not. What ‘append at the tables yesterday, Nev. Why you try to cheat me?”

“Cheat,” Nev said in mock outrage. “I’m no cheat. I lost money on that roulette table. Money that is now gathering dust in your safe, of that, I’m sure.”

“Not me, Nev. I didn’t get nothing from that transaction. Your brother saw to that. He is a rotten apple in a barrel, Nev. In your barrel Nev. So, what you do about ‘im?”

“Not a lot I can do, is there, Dio? Unless you want me to shoot my brother.”

“Naw, Nev. That is unnecessary. We carry on with our little business transactions, keeping an eye out for your brother and others like ‘im. What is it you have for me to sell?”

Nev sat in the seat to Dio’s right and dropped his briefcase onto his lap. He flicked through the small number combination lock and opened the deep brown briefcase. Nev retrieved the contents, a sheaf of foolscap papers and a set of draughtsman’s plans. Nev unfolded the plans and held them up for Dio to see. Mornair moved around to Dio’s left side so that he too could get a good look at the plans.

“This is worth a few hundred thousand,” Nev said, holding the plans high and wide.

“What is it?” Dio said, peering closely at the drawing on the plan.

“It’s a plane.”

“But it’s only got one wing. There should be at least two.”

“That’s the beauty of this fighter plane. Its design is revolutionary.”

“What it called?”

“She’s called a Spitfire.”

“I like the name, but not the design.”

“Dio, you are not, in any stretch of anyone’s imagination, an aircraft designer. I’m telling you now, this aircraft is a potential war winner. A world beater. A British designer created it especially for the RAF.”

“How much?”

“One hundred.”

“Fifty.”

“Seventy-five.”

“Done,” Dio said with a grin. “That will pay off your debt to me.”

“I hadn’t finished haggling. Eighty-five.”

Dio frowned, ground his teeth and a rumble of anger gurgled up from his belly. Suddenly, Dio broke into a broad grin and burst into laughter.

“You drive a hard bargain, Nev. You are cheeky and best of all, you are a true English gentleman. I will agree on one condition.”

Nev smiled. “What condition?”

“You introduce me to your king.”

“George the fifth!”

“Is that a problem?”

Nev digested the request. Realised he had no choice but to agree. This deal must stand if his brother was going to get his evidence.

“Very well, Dio. I’ll make the arrangements when I get home.”

Dio sat back on his throne and grunted, another big smile creasing his face. “We have a deal,” he said.

At that precise moment, when Dio Deberge believed, he was finally going to get a chance at joining the British aristocracy, the British Military Police broke into Dio’s inner sanctum and entered through smashed doors and windows. Thirty Military Police and several other ranks from the Durham Light Infantry, rifles, and handguns at the ready, closed in around Dio, Jules, Nev and Dio’s ten guards. All of whom tried to make good their escape, only to find themselves blocked, cuffed, and led away to a waiting military convoy of camouflaged British Army trucks.

Dio sat, stood, sat again. He shifted his weight left, then right as his face deepened into a reddish hue that would look good spurting from a volcano.

“Call the police! Call the Police!”

“That won’t do any good, Dio,” Nev said, calmly staying in his seat and watching the turn of events.

“I own the police,” Dio said with a growl.

“But you don’t own the British Army. If this is my brother’s doing, don’t worry. I’ll sort it out.”

Dio frowned but sat back on his throne and awaited his fate, knowing there was little else he could do.

Nev looked at the mass of British khaki uniforms. He could only see one junior officer, who was not his brother. The officer turned and spied Nev and Dio, smiled with a somewhat malicious demeanour. He sauntered over to where Nev and Dio sat.

“Dio Deberge and Nev Fordham, I take it.”

“Correct,” Nev said. “Where’s my brother?”

“On his way back to Catterick, Captain Fordham. You and Mr. Deberge are to follow me. Oh, and you are both under arrest on various charges.”

Nev, for the first time that night, looked worried.

“What happening, Nev? Who this man is?”

“Lieutenant David Samson, Mr. Deberge.”

“Why is my brother on his way to Catterick?”

“I do not know, Captain. All I know is that he was relieved of command of this MP unit and told to report to the barracks at Catterick. I’m now in charge, and you two will follow me.”

Nev stood and looked around, a forlorn hope his brother may be pulling a sick joke on him. Dio followed suit, also looking around, but with no idea what it was he was looking at or looking for.

Outside, Nev and Dio were hustled into a staff car by two burly Military Police corporals, each sitting alongside Nev and Dio. Handcuffs were produced, and the two men were now firmly cuffed to the MPs. Nev realised they were taking no chances of either of them escaping and the night had taken a serious turn for the worse.

Nev and Dio were going to face a military court and Nev knew he was in serious trouble with his only source of help having left Egypt, blighty bound.

Chapter Six

All Things Will Pass

Cairo, November 1929

Jessie's Childhood could not have been more idyllic. From a precocious child not wanting to leave England, she became a precocious child not wanting to leave Egypt. But someone, somewhere, once decreed that all things in our lives must eventually pass us by and leave our lives forever. Her childhood was ending, her beloved uncle Nev had disappeared, and nobody wanted to talk about it. All she had come to know, come to love, seemed to pass before her and away from her life. All except Amir. The boy turned youth who was almost the same age as her, though nobody really knew his age, least of all Amir, was coming with them, back to England. Amir would gain an education and he would work for the Fordham household.

Jessie had grown up in many ways and she no longer questioned the army desire to move families about like pieces on a chessboard. She no longer questioned her mother's unstinting loyalty to her father. But she wasn't fully grown in all things, especially where her father was concerned. She still questioned him and his authority over her more often than Albert Fordham would have wanted.

“Why?”

Albert shook his head, not for the first and certainly not the last time in his lifetime where his eldest daughter was concerned. His twin sons, Kit and Jimmy and the recent addition, Molly, were sparkling examples of childhood conformity. Jessie was exactly the opposite.

Albert Fordham sat in his favourite chair in a small room he used as a study. “Because I say so. Or rather...”

“Because the army says so. Yes daddy, you’ve said that so many times before. But why can’t mummy look after us?”

“Your mother does look after you, but she needs a little help sometimes and Armel will be a great help to your mother.”

“She’s not British.”

“No, she’s French, and you should be used to French people. You like Madame and Maurice Noaire, don’t you?”

Jessie nodded. “But I don’t like Armel. She looks too much like mummy.”

Albert sighed heavily, again. “That’s not Armel’s fault.”

Jessie didn’t have an answer to that. “I’m going to my room,” she blurted out and turned and left her father’s study.

Albert gave another sigh and shook his head. “Jessie, Jessie, Jessie,” he muttered, before turning back to proof reading his report on Nev’s arrest and the plan he had of ensnaring Dio Deberge. His colonel wanted Deberge out of his hair and out of Egypt, and Albert’s plan was to be approved, based on the report he was about to file.



Leaving Egypt was expected, but Albert Fordham didn’t quite expect it to happen so soon. He wanted to implement his plan to close Dio

Deberge's operation in Cairo and get his brother off *scot-free*. It hadn't happened in the way he had planned and he and his family were moved back to Catterick with only 24 hours' notice. Their belongings were packed and shipped for them and the Fordham's and their children were suddenly on an RAF flight to Britain, as opposed to the usual transport of a slow boat back to Britain.

Back in Catterick, Albert received news through unofficial channels, via Britain's Secret Intelligence Service headquarters, that he had been spotted for the job of Military Attaché to the British Embassy in Paris and with it an unprecedented promotion to full colonel. The news came as a surprise to Albert and Ruth but was greeted by a shrug of all the children's shoulders, all except Jessie. She was now not only precocious, but soon to be a teenager. A combination that was sure to leave both the adults in the Fordham household truly exasperated and stressed.



"I have no news, Lieutenant Fordham. Your brother, Captain Fordham, has been tried and found guilty. That is all I know. I know nothing of the sentence."

"And the Egyptian? Dio Deberge?"

"He was shot and killed trying to escape."

"Thank you, sir. I appreciate this information is classified." Albert Fordham stood to attention and saluted. He turned and marched out of the adjutant's office. Turning left down the wooden corridor of the regimental offices, he marched to the end. He opened the door, stepped out, and quietly shut the door. A look of anguish crossed his face, and Albert swore. "Hellfire and damnation!"

Lieutenant Albert Fordham walked away from the offices. It was quite cold in Catterick, not at all sultry and warm, as would have been in Egypt. He wondered where his brother was and what his conditions were like. Then he realised the British Army was trying to keep his brother's fate a closed secret, in order for Albert's career, at least, to flourish. Captain Nev Fordham had his chance in the army and blew it, big time. Nev Fordham may have been executed for treason, for all he knew. Albert's plan had been approved by his colonel in Egypt and the plans for the spitfire, suitably doctored and useless, were approved for use as bait.

Now he knew that all involved in the trap had been moved on, himself included. And those at the very pointy end of the trap, his brother Nev and Dio Deberge, were left to their fate.

All Albert could do was carry on surreptitiously trying to find out what Nev's fate was and hope he could try to put things right. His only genuine hope was that Nev was still alive and had not been left in the hands of the hangman.

Chapter Seven

A Dishonourable Discharge

Catterick Garrison, England, March 1930

Nev Fordham was indeed still alive. And it only took six months for Albert to discover his brother was alive and on his doorstep in Catterick.

“What the hell are you doing here?”

“Well, that’s a fine greeting from a brother?”

Albert Fordham held his door open, but didn’t invite Nev in.

“Have you been released from prison?”

“Sort of. Dishonourable discharge. They kindly gave me some cash, five pounds, and a limited travel warrant. So, here I am.”

Albert was slowly shutting his door, shaking his head. “You cannot stay here? The camp commander, when he hears about it, will go mad.”

Nev placed a large, booted foot over the doorstep. “I must stay here. We have unfinished work. Our friend in Dover said I should visit you, brother. Seems only natural, don’t you think?”

Albert pulled the door open at the mention of their friend in Dover. "Inside, now. Before anyone sees you. Ruth is not well. She's upstairs having a nap, so please, be quiet."

The two men moved into Albert's home, into the kitchen, and Nev sat at the table while Albert made two cups of tea.

"So, where do we go from here?" Albert asked, as he waited for the kettle on the gas hob to boil, looking out the kitchen window as storm clouds gathered, readying for a good old fashioned Yorkshire downpour.

Nev couldn't help but notice his brother's tapping fingers on the kitchen worktop.

"Are you agitated, Albert."

Albert turned around. "Agitated? Agitated? Of course I'm agitated. My wife is ill. The doctor wants her to go to the hospital for tests. And now you have turned up on my doorstep and Brocklehurst wants us to live together? Is that what he wants?"

As Nev shrugged his shoulders, a high-pitched scream pierced the air.

"Uncle Nev. Uncle Nev," Jessie Fordham shouted as she entered the kitchen.

"Jessie, my dear girl," Nev grunted as Jessie flung her arms around Nev's waist.

"Jessie, go and play outside," Albert said, making it clear he was annoyed with his daughter.

"Aww, why?"

"Don't question me. Do as I say, girl. Go on. Outside, now."

Jessie looked up at Nev and Nev winked back. "I'll come outside shortly," he said.

Jessie nodded and opened the back door to the garden and raced outside to play on the swing in the garden.

“Brocklehurst is in Dover,” Nev said. “It’s all right for him to pontificate. I had one brief telephone conversation with him and he told me to come here.”

“Told you?”

“Yes, dammit. I’m doing as I’m told. What’s your excuse?”

The kettle boiled and Albert Fordham made tea and prepared to have his brother stay with his family for the near future.

Chapter Eight

A Slow Death

Catterick Garrison, England, February 1932

Jessie stood to the right side of the large bed her mother occupied. Her mother looked gaunt, worse than gaunt, she looked deathly. Her head resembled a living skull, a nightmare figure in her mother's bed. Jessie's thoughts went back to the time she had got lost at the Midnight Lake, and woke up with a skull staring at her. Her mother was now that skull. For a moment, she told herself it wasn't *really* her mother. But of course, the nightmare was real, and it was her mother, skin sallow and sagging down her face. Her once lustrous blonde hair was now only sparsely tufted in grey patches across her scalp. Her mother was obviously ill and any croaking words she muttered were accompanied by a wheezing cough. The skeleton-in-the-bed would be gone soon, and the teenage girl left with her memories of a beautiful and loving mother.

The howling gale outside added to the macabre and surreal scene. Every gust conjured up in the fifteen-year-old a host of images of witches and ghouls and malevolent spirits flying round the house in the middle of the worst snowstorm she had experienced. Her father

had not arrived home yet and so the girl was doing her best to keep her mother company, keeping up her frail spirits. She had spent so much time with her mother over the last few months, time she felt her father should have used to lift the spirits of his sick wife. But no, her father was mostly away, doing soldier things. His wife didn't seem to matter too much to him.

The door opened quietly, and the girl looked round. Her father stood framed in the doorway, in his full military uniform of a major in the Durham Light Infantry. He had hurried from a staff meeting at the nearby Catterick Camp in North Yorkshire.

Closing the door, quietly removing his military greatcoat and cap then dropping them to the floor, the girl's father padded across the carpeted bedroom and sat on the opposite side of the bed to his daughter, next to his wife. He gently took hold of his wife's other hand. He knew time was running out. His wife didn't have long.

The girl shot a glance at her mother's face again, but immediately averted her eyes. She knew little about her mother's illness except that it was cancer and she could tell her mother was in pain. What she didn't want to see what was evidently written large across her mother's ravaged face, death was but days away.

The door to the bedroom opened slowly and quietly. A younger woman, almost looking like a younger version of her mother, entered the room. The girl blessed her with a sardonic smile. The woman smiled back, not quite grasping the meaning of the girl's smile. She was carrying a tray with medicine bottles containing pills and a hypodermic loaded with a clear liquid.

The father turned to look at the young woman. "Medicine time?"

The younger woman nodded and set the tray down on a bedside cabinet, turned and left the room.

The girl watched with what she hoped wasn't a ghoulish fascination as her father administered the medicine in the hypodermic then two sets of pills washed down with water.

When he finished giving out the medicine, he dabbed his wife's dry and cracked lips gently, with loving care, whispering, "I love you."

His wife attempted a smile, which looked more like the rictus smile from the skull of a long dead human. "Ah nuv oo, oo," she said with an effort.

To the daughter, it was an almost comical aside that in another time would have been funny. As it was, the cancerous sores in her mother's mouth made the skeleton-in-the-bed grimace in pain, despite the obvious attempt at showing affection.

Her husband squeezed his wife's hand gently and the little girl shed a lonely tear.

The husband waited for his wife to slide into a fitful sleep. Then he gently led his daughter away from the room and downstairs.

"Are you hungry?"

The daughter walked into the dining room and sat at the large table.

"No, I'm not. And I'm not happy either."

"What's wrong?"

"You know what's wrong. I'm not stupid. I know you're having an affair with her," she said, tapping the fingers of her right hand on the table, one after the other. Her left hand simply shook. A rage was building inside her, emotions pouring forth and she was ready to burst, to scream in defiance of her father and his lover.

"While my mother lies dying upstairs, you show good grace when she brings in medicine, water, and food. But downstairs, after I've gone to bed, you hold your secret assignations here, in the dining room."

The father was stunned. "How?"

"Doors have keyholes and keyholes without keys in them make good spy holes. All the better to see you by."

At that moment, the door opened and the woman who had previously entered her mother's room with medicines, now entered with a tray of tea and biscuits. "I thought you may like something light to eat," she said, her accent giving away her foreign origins.

"Thank you, Armel," the man said.

The girl averted her eyes, somewhat in shame at believing this woman, her nanny, had stolen her father from her mother.

Armel placed the tray on the table and walked past where the girl sat.

"Do you want me to run a bath for you, Jessie?" She touched the back of Jessie's head lightly. Jessie pushed her head to one side, looked up at Armel and sneered.

"No, I don't. And I don't want to be in the same room as you two either, but while I'm at it, tell me why you are never around. You're always off on some mission or other, never at home to help us. Only in extreme circumstances."

"I go where the army sends me, it's part of the job."

"And the army won't give you compassionate leave?"

"I'm here, now, aren't I."

Jessie stood, pushing the chair back. "I'm going to bed. Good-night." She stepped to one side and pushed the dining room chair back under the table. Without another word or a look back, she left the dining room and walked up the stairs to her own room. There she threw herself onto her bed and cried herself to sleep.



Nev Fordham sat at the dining room table, chewing his breakfast toast and marmalade. He was alone and liking the peace and quiet so rarely visited on the Fordham household these days.

His peace of mind was disturbed when the dining room door opened and Jessie's head popped round the door.

"Coast's clear, Jessie. They both left earlier. Armel has gone for more medication for your mother and..."

"Don't tell me. Duty calls for my dad. Typical."

"Are you still angry with your father and Armel?"

Jessie sat down and stole a triangle of her uncle's toast. "I'm always angry with them. There never seems to be a day goes by that I don't get angry."

Nev smiled. "Teenage angst. It happens to us all."

Jessie smiled back at her uncle. "I can't see you as a teenager, uncle."

"I never was. I was one of those rare breeds of human, born with an adult brain in a baby head. The first few years were very frustrating, having adult ideas and thoughts but unable to articulate them."

Jessie giggled at the thought.

"You know, you look so much better with a smile on your face than a scowl. Oh, here comes trouble," Nev said.

The dining room door opened slowly, and the family pet, a black and white springer spaniel named Bounce, poked his head round the door.

The dog sniffed around until it found the source of the smell of toasted bread, butter, and marmalade. He slowly walked up to Nev, sat down, and lifted his left paw.

"Bounce, leave uncle Nev alone," Jessie said.

"It's fine, Jessie. He can have the crust. I've never liked the crust."

"Dad said you went to jail," Jessie blurted out.

Nev smiled once more at his precocious niece. "You've wanted to ask that question for a while, haven't you?"

Jessie nodded, eager to hear the grim stories of life in a prison.

"I'll let you into a secret, just between you and me," Nev said, tossing the crust to a slobbering Bounce. "I was never in prison. But don't tell your dad or Armel. It's our secret." Nev got up, walked to the dining room door, then stopped and turned back to Jessie. "By the way, I have some great news."

"What?"

"Your father is being made a full colonel. He will be Military Attaché at the British Embassy, Paris."

"France? Well, that will be useful with owning a summer house."

"It is. But the best bit is we all get to live in France."

"But I don't..."

"Want to go to France. Well, I have news for you kiddo, you have no choice in the matter. So just go with the flow of life and enjoy it. And don't worry. You'll soon be going to university and I'll bet that will be Cambridge, same as your parents." Nev winked at Jessie once and walked out of the room.

Jessie let out a sigh.

Adults are so complicated.

Two days later, Ruth Fordham's slow death ended as the grim reaper paid a visit and took the-skeleton-in-the-bed into death's dark embrace.



"We are moving to France in a few weeks' time," Albert Fordham said at breakfast, a week after his wife's funeral.

Nev looked up from reading his newspaper, looked at Jessie and waited for the storm front to hit.

Jessie nodded, sat back in her chair, and sighed. "At least Bounce will have somewhere to play," she said. "Assuming we, the young ones, will be living at the Midnight Lake."

Albert looked at Nev. Nev hid behind his newspaper.

"What?" Jessie said. "What am I missing here?" looking in Nev's direction, who still cowered behind his newspaper.

"You will be living at the lake, along with the others. Bounce will not be living with you."

"Well, he can't live at the embassy," Jessie said in a matter-of-fact way, cutting in half a slice of buttered toast. "Where is he, anyway?"

"He's with the vet. He's too old to travel and besides, there will be nobody to look after him."

Jessie had the toast triangle to her mouth when the realisation hit her like a bombshell. "No," she shouted, throwing the toast on the table, jumping up and running for the front door.

"Jessie! Jessie, it's too late. He's gone."

Jessie had the front door open and was about to go round the side of the house to retrieve her bicycle. She turned and stormed back into the house and screamed at her father when she entered the dining room. "No! You can't be so cold. He was my dog." Her face was red with rage and warm tears rolled down her cheeks.

"Our dog," Albert said calmly. "If you want to be technical about it, my dog. I bought him."

Jessie glared at her father, who calmly picked up the toast she had discarded, and bit a corner off, eating slowly, locking his cold eyes on his daughter's rage filled eyes.

Nev crumpled his newspaper and let it fall to the floor. He stood up and embraced Jessie. "Come on, let's take a walk outside."

Jessie wrapped her arms around her uncle and let the tears flow, screaming, and shouting into her uncle's chest.

Nev looked at his brother.

"How could you do that to your own daughter?"

Albert shrugged. "It had to be done, Jessie. For his sake and for ours."

"No," Jessie shouted, muffled by her uncle's chest.

"Yes," Albert said. "In time, you will thank me."

Nev, tears in his eyes, walked his niece to the dining-room door and looked back at his brother. He shook his head and left with Jessie.

The father and daughter's life would never be the same. Not for losing a pet. Not for losing her mother, but for her father gaining a new bride in France, only three months after his first wife died.

Chapter Nine

The Black Chamber

Poznań Army Command, Poland, May 1937

“What we have here is information that would be useful if we had a complete machine to work with,” the Polish military commander of the Black Chamber said, pointing to a table and chairs where several piles of documents waited to be examined.

The commander and three students stood inside a dimly lit chamber at the command centre in Poland. The students, two young men and a young woman, stood at the other side of the table, looking down at the pile of papers. Their spokesperson, Marian Jankowski, nodded his head slowly.

“What we need here is a lick of paint. This place is awful. We can’t work in a hole like this. It needs brightening up, we’re mathematicians and cryptologists. You can’t expect us to be inventive in a dump like this.”

The younger man and woman with Jankowski nodded in agreement.

“It’s called The Black Chamber for a reason,” the army commander said, somewhat indignantly.

“Which is nothing to do with the paintwork. If you want us to build an Enigma machine from scratch, we need to be working in a bright and clean environment. So, my statement still stands. What we need is a lick of paint,” the young man said, stabbing a finger at the piles of papers. Jankowski grabbed a dilapidated wooden chair and sat down.

The chair was not happy, creaking loudly. “And we need chairs that will stand a lot of punishment.”

“Punishment?”

The young woman giggled. “Marian likes to lean back, a lot, in his chair. Helps him think, so he says.”

Jankowski and his two companions had been given the task of reconstructing, sight-unseen, a Nazi German military Enigma cipher machine. It was, Jankowski admitted, a daunting task, but one he knew they could complete. But he refused to work in an environment that didn’t help with the flow of his of their creative juices. “If you want us to build the machine, then we demand a better working environment. For a small amount of money, you will certainly be more than happy with our work.

The army commander was not used to dealing with civilians, let alone civilians that, according to his superior, were vital to the inevitable conflict looming with Nazi Germany.

“We could do it ourselves. All you must do is supply the materials.” Marek Babiuch smiled as he spoke. Jankowski turned and looked aghast at the younger man.

Zosia Chowaniec giggled at the thought of painting, but Jankowski’s angry stare made her raise her hands in despair. “At this rate, we will never get started,” she said.

“Very well. Come back in two days and you will have a room painted in white and green, with new and sturdy wooden chairs. But I want

results from that day onwards and I want them quickly. Do we have an accord?"

"Yes," Zosia hissed, slapping Jankowski on the back.

Marek clapped once. "Let's celebrate. Where's the nearest bar?"

Marian Jankowski shook his head, then nodded. "Very well, commander. We have an accord. And as my young friend said, where's the nearest bar. He's buying."

Chapter Ten

Graduation

Cambridge University, England, June 1939

“I’m going to count down from three, and when I shout, ‘*Now*,’ that’s when you throw. Ready?” The photographer looked into his lens and started the countdown. “3. 2. 1. *Now!*”

Suddenly the sky was full of flying mortarboards and the photographer got his picture.

Jessie caught her mortarboard as it fell, but others were not so lucky, and the headwear took ten minutes to be sorted out and returned to the rightful owners. The photographer waited patiently, and then individual photos and family photos were taken.

“We’re up next,” Jessie whispered to her father, “and what I would give to just walk away...”

“You can’t just walk away, Jessie. You have a responsibility. Your mother wants to see these photographs.”

Jessie said nothing, but her father could see she wasn’t happy.

“I just hate all the fuss,” she said with a resigned sigh. “Anyway, Armel is not my mother and...”

Once more Jessie's father interrupted. "She is your mother in all but name. It was Armel who brought you up after your mother died. Never forget that. And while we're on the subject, what have you done with your hair?"

"I dyed it, and don't change the subject. Armel was paid to look after me, she was my nanny!" Jessie shouted, dismissively, and stormed off, her long peroxide blond dyed hair flowing behind her like a lion's mane.

Albert Fordham sighed at the usual turn of events.

"One day you will stand your ground and not walk away, Jessie," Albert Fordham shouted to his daughter's receding back. "And I preferred your hair deep brown. So did your mother."

Jessie waved her right arm in a dismissive gesture of defiance and carried on walking.

Albert shook his head. "One day, Jessie, circumstances will make you stand your ground and not run away," he said calmly.



As the afternoon wore on, Jessie caught up to her best friend, Rose Sinclair, and draped an arm round Rose's neck. "Your dad didn't make it again, I see."

"No and I'm not bothered," Rose muttered as she carried on walking. "Let's face it. I've graduated, I've got a job offer, why worry. I'm out of here and he can't do a damn thing to stop me."

"Come with me and my dad," Jessie blurted out.

"To France? To that black lake of yours? No thank you. Gives me the creeps just thinking about what's in there."

“There’s nothing in there but fish. I’ve been in there many times. I learned to swim in that lake. Besides, you’re half French and speak the language perfectly. Better than me! You’ll love it there.”

“And the other half of me is American. No, I’m off to America. I’m starting my job three months early. It’s the State Department for me, in good ol’ DC.”

Jessie stopped walking. “Then is this goodbye... no, no it’s not. We still have our final Judo bout.”

“Do you have to remind me? I will never beat you.”

“You’re a black belt, like me, of course you can beat me... if you try.”

“That’ll be the day, Jessie.” Rose said, realising Jessie was no longer beside her. She stopped walking and turned to face Jessie. She smiled at her friend. “I guess I’m just not judo material. Never mind. The last bout and then we are off to far-flung places. But we’ll see each other again, one day.”

“Not if my dad has anything to do with it. He wants me to join the Foreign Office. Could you picture me cooped up in an office in London? Old and wizened,” Jessie said, bending over and pretending to be old. “I’m so old I can’t walk upright,” she said, staggering and laughing at the same time.

“Your dad’s a diplomat, and your mother is too. What makes you think you’ll be anything different?”

“Stepmother. Let’s not forget that crucial point. And my dad’s a Military Attaché. I’ll be different because I’m destined for better things than the stuffy old Foreign Office. I’m heading off into the wide-blue-yonder for a life of adventure. Now, I’ll see you in the gym in an hour.”



Jessie squared off against Rose. Both had achieved black belt status in Judo, but Jessie was more adept at the discipline. Rose hadn't got the interest or the inclination to practice.

This last bout sealed their friendship and allowed Jessie a little more practice. Ten minutes had gone by and Rose had spent most of the time on the mat.

"I give in," Rose exclaimed. "You win. Let me go to America with some dignity."

Jessie exhaled, pulled her friend up and they bowed to each other, before falling into each other's arms and hugging.

"There was never a chance I was going to beat you," Rose said, still out of breath.

"Think about this, Rose. You could have been as good as me and travelled the world with me, seeking adventure and treasures galore."

"Instead, I'm going to America and you're off to that black lake. I'll stick to America, Jessie. You can keep the adventure and the black lake."

Chapter Eleven

Colonel Fordham

The British Embassy, Paris, France, June 1939

Colonel Albert Fordham strolled round the manicured lawn at the rear of the British Embassy in Paris, alongside his French wife, Armel. The embassy was once a famous Hotel, L'Hôtel de Charost, bought in 1814 by the Duke of Wellington after the battle of Waterloo. Its sole purpose was to serve as the British Embassy, which it had done for over a hundred and twenty years. The gardens were still maintained as though the hotel was full of foreign guests.

It made for a peaceful backdrop to the frantic but orderly chaos inside the building. It was clear to most at this point that Nazi Germany would soon invade Poland. And that being the case, Britain would have to honour an agreement made to the Polish government, to come to their aid. The French would also have to honour their treaty and declare war on Germany.

“You’re worried, aren’t you?” Armel asked.

Albert smiled, “I would be a fool to say otherwise. Hitler will invade, our two nations will be at war again against Germany. We will

have to leave and return to Britain. It will not be the same as last time. This war won't be a stalemate, the Nazis will overrun France in weeks."

"When you say it like that, it makes the French sound like fools," Armel said, a small frown on her face.

Armel wasn't tall, she wasn't glamorous, but she was beautiful, with a short-cut to her blond and lustrous hair. Her perpetual bright demeanour belied what she and her husband both knew. France would undoubtedly be overrun in weeks if war broke out.

Fordham was grim in his response. "What does your esteemed minister have to say?"

Armel shook her head. "Officially the *Ministre des Armées* says nothing. Unofficially, I'm told, they know the Germans are probing already. There are skirmishes all along the Maginot line. Only yesterday there was an incursion by German troops close to Ouvrage Schoenenbourg."

"The Germans are probing, noting weaknesses. Of course, the Maginot line is a waste of time and space. Fortifications like Ouvrage Schoenenbourg are only now being finished and they're covered in bird droppings already. The German tanks will simply go round them and leave them to the artillery. Within weeks they will be close to, if not in Paris. We must make plans to leave."

"Let's go inside, it's getting chilly out here."

Albert nodded, and they made their way to the embassy door.

In Albert's office, after he had settled into his chair and Armel seated herself in the visitor's chair, Albert used the internal phone system to order tea and biscuits.

"It's about the only English custom I like," Armel said when the tea and biscuits had been delivered by one of the Embassy kitchen staff.

Albert smiled. "Me too. You can be mother."

Two biscuits each and halfway through their tea, there was a knock at the door.

“Oh, now what?” Albert groaned under his breath. “Enter,” he said loudly.

The door opened and a mustachioed face peered round the door. “Are you busy, Colonel?”

“Heaton,” Albert said. “What can I do for you. Come in, come in. Don’t scowl, I won’t bite.”

Heaton in full captain’s uniform of the 1st Battalion the Coldstream Guards hesitantly walked into the office. “Good afternoon, Mrs Fordham,” he said, nodding to Armel.

“Good afternoon, captain. I’ll leave you to it, Albert. See you later,” she said as she left the office.

“Shut the door and sit down, Heaton. What can I do for you?”

Heaton seated himself in the chair Armel had just vacated. He crossed his left leg over his right leg, gave a little harrumph to clear his throat. “Well, two things really, sir.”

“Very well, fire away, Heaton.”

“We have a man from SIS coming in and he has arranged for a meeting with two high ranking Nazi SD officers. These officers want to discuss a plan to assassinate Hitler.”

“I’ve not been told about this. Why haven’t I been told about this?”

Heaton fidgeted slightly in his seat and harrumphed once more. “Well, that brings me to my second issue. SIS have informed me that they believe information passing into our office here, in the embassy, that is, the Military Attaché’s office, is not being forwarded to them. It seems the clever chaps at Bletchley Park have information that we have a spy in our midst.

Albert, who had been sitting forward, listening to Heaton, sat back, the colour draining from his face. "And why haven't they informed me, the Military Attaché, about this?"

"Ah, they tell me that all the staff, and that includes you, are under suspicion, sir."

The colour in Albert's face returned abruptly as it turned crimson. "What! What! Me? They think I am a spy?"

"It could be anyone sir, even poor Marcel is suspected."

"And not you? You are not a suspect?"

"Well, yes and no. It seems I haven't quite been here long enough to be implicated, but they do say that they are still piecing together a timeline for the signals intelligence they have received."

Albert sat forward once more. "What sort of fool would think I would betray my country to the Germans. I've been in the army since I was a boy."

"Not Germany, sir. The Soviet Union."

"What? No, no and again no. That idea is even more preposterous."

"Well, this is what I am told and all I can say is we need to carry on as normal and wait for SIS to come up with the proof to catch this supposed spy."

Albert picked a pencil up, twiddled with it in his hands and then snapped it in half. "So, we carry on as normal, do we? What about this SIS man and his ludicrous idea?"

"He will be with us within the week and I am to escort him. You should come along as an observer if that is fine by you."

"Fine," Albert said, sweeping the broken pieces of pencil off his desk and into his waste paper bin. "Send me the details and I'll arrange to be free at that time. Where is this meeting to be held?"

Heaton stood up. "Sittard, in the Netherlands. I've pencilled in sometime in November."

“Fine, assuming the war hasn’t started by then.”

“Yes,” Heaton said. Then he slowly turned and walked to the door. He opened it and turned back to look at Albert. “If there is any change on that other matter, I’ll let you know.”

Albert nodded and swivelled his chair round to look out the window.

Heaton’s face turned to a deep frown as he exited the office and shut the door.



Albert read the message one more time.

***Heaton fishing. Proceed
as planned.***

Albert crumpled up the paper. Placed it in the ashtray. He took a box of matches, struck one and lit the paper.

As he watched the flames devour the paper, there was a knock at the door and Armel walked in. She immediately saw the dying flame. “Secret messages?”

“For my eyes only,” Albert said with a winning smile. “Now, where am I taking you tonight for a meal.”

Chapter Twelve

Making Plans

The British Embassy, Paris, France, July 1939

“We are making plans to stay,” the Ambassador said with a definitive sweep of his left hand over the top of his desk.

Fordham’s chair, opposite the Ambassador’s, creaked as he adjusted his sitting position with a sigh.

“Stay? One minute stay, the next leave, then we stay, leave, stay, can we not, for once, make our minds up?”

“You’re the military man, Fordham, you tell me. Surely, they explained to you what it is we should be, will be, doing.”

Fordham moved his position once more, and the chair protested ever more loudly. “Sir, you know, as well as I do, my position here is purely for gathering intelligence. The military back home tell me little, it’s very much a one-way street of information flowing to them, for them to make their analysis and then tell us what to do.”

The Ambassador smiled. “Then we do as we are told. We make plans to stay and see what tomorrow brings.”

Fordham’s chair creaked as he stood to leave. “Can we at least oil this chair,” he said with a smile.

The Ambassador nodded. "I'll see what I can do, though I doubt our French janitor and his staff will be with us much longer.

"In that case, and as we are staying, I'm making plans to go to my house in the country, for a while, sir. I may as well sit in a chair that doesn't creak."

"You may as well, Albert, you may as well."

"Until then, I have one more secret assignation to fulfil."

"Ah, the secret coding device."

Fordham nodded. "Does everyone know about this device?"

"Only those who read your secret letters, Albert," the Ambassador said with a rueful smile.

"I'll be back later, and we can discuss the role of the spymaster in an embassy setting as opposed to his boss who knows more than the spymaster, it seems."

Chapter Thirteen

Secrets

Rue de Rivoli, Paris, France, July 1939

Albert steered his Citroen 7 through the wide street of the Rue de Rivoli, turning left into a side street. The erratic swish-swash of the windscreen wipers toiling to clear the fine spray of drizzle constantly landing on the screen made Albert peer hard into the misty gloom. He guessed he was where he should be and brought the car to an eventual stop a few metres down. Albert sat with the engine idling, waiting for a sign. The drizzle made it hard to see anything let alone a sign, and the windscreen wipers jerked their way across the glass, smearing rather than clearing the fine rain. Albert saw the sign, which duly appeared a few metres further on. A man, stood close to a barber's shop, pulled out a red handkerchief, removed his straw boater hat and wiped his face.

A straw boater in this weather? A little too incongruous for me.

Albert shut the engine off and opened the car door. With a grunt, he squeezed himself out of the tight-fitting Citroen, stood and stretched. He shut the car door and strolled toward the man wearing

the boater and using the red handkerchief to wipe the sleeve of his dark red blazer, its gold buttons twinkled in the early afternoon sunlight.

As Albert approached, the man turned fully toward him and made a show of surprise.

“My dear, Albert,” the man said loudly in an over effusive manner. He walked the few remaining paces to Albert and grasped Albert’s hands, shaking them up and down vigorously. “What a pleasant surprise. What brings you here on a sunny Sunday?”

“I decided I needed a haircut.”

The secret phrases dispensed with both men regarded each other with a bit of suspicion, topped with urgency. In Albert’s role he was expected to follow up mysterious messages and carry out clandestine meetings with other Military Attachés from other embassies. But this time it was different. There was a war coming, time was precious, and both men knew it.

“Forgive me for being impolite and not introducing myself. But you appreciate, these days it pays to keep one’s business to oneself. I have the rotors for the machine. Once fitted and calibrated, the German’s secret transmissions will be a secret no more.”

“Very well,” Albert said. “I’m told Paris and London are already working on the code machines and all they need is the final rotors to complete their work.”

“I would not put my trust in the work Paris is doing.”

“But...”

“No, I do not mean to cast aspersions, they, the French, are good people, but the Germans, when they attack, will be in Paris within days. Should the cryptographer’s be caught, all is lost. No, this device needs to go to London, as soon as possible.”

“Fine,” Albert said, producing a small, dark red, briefcase from inside his grey overcoat. He opened the briefcase, and the man plunged

his left hand into his expansive blazer and pulled out a small bundle, wrapped in oily cloth. He dropped the package into Albert's briefcase and turned to leave.

"Do you not want a receipt?" Albert asked.

The man looked over his shoulder. "You British! Always the stiff-upper lip. I am glad to be rid of it, my friend."

"Despite this clandestine meeting and your need for secrecy, I know who you are and that you are the Czech intelligence chief."

The man didn't bat an eyelid. "That which is now in your possession, can be a death sentence if certain people find you have it."

"You must let me help you leave before it's too late. Once the Germans attack, you, we, in this line of business, can expect no mercy. They will torture us for information."

The man took a deep breath. "Yes, you are correct. I have already contacted your people at Broadway. They have arranged a flight to take me and a select few to England."

"And your family?"

The man shook his head. "No, my wife will take care of the children and make her own way out."

"Isn't that rather..."

"Callous? No. It's a necessity. The people in my group, me included, can make a difference to this war simply by cracking the enigma codes or breaking signals intelligence. My wife is an excellent cook and a great lover, neither of which will win the war."

He held out his hand and Albert Fordham shook hands with the Czech agent. "I hope I can be as brave as you and your wife."

With a smile on his face, the man said, "We all investigate our opponents and our friends' backgrounds to know who we are dealing with. I wish you well, Fordham."

"You too, Movec. God speed."

And with that he was gone, into the building and moving as far from Albert as quickly as possible.



“You must ensure this is kept both secret from anyone who approaches you and from my family. I should have been doing this errand myself but have no time to ensure it is completed. So, I rely on you Marcel. Make sure you get this to my daughter at the house.”

Albert’s diplomatic chauffeur nodded, taking the proffered briefcase from his boss.

“Very well, sir. I’ll do my best.”

Albert watched as Marcel walked to the Citroen he had used the day before, got in, started the engine and with a wave from the open window drove out of the courtyard and onto the road.

Albert sighed heavily. He allowed himself one last look at the departing car before entering the embassy.

“I hope this goes well,” he muttered to himself as he opened the side door into the embassy and walked in.

Chapter Fourteen

Ouvrage Schoenenbourg

Département of Bas-Rhin, France, July 1939

It was just before noon on a lovely sunny day at the fortified outpost of Ouvrage Schoenenbourg, part of the fortifications that made up the Maginot Line. As was usual in such strange times, the Germans were teasing Capitaine Bertold's small company of fourteen French soldiers. German snipers were firing at Bertold's men, seeing who could put a bullet closest without hitting them. It had been going on for days and so far, luckily, nobody on Bertold's side had been hurt.

Bertold had to be seen to be defending the French border, mainly because of the American journalist in place in his unit, but also for the wider French and world audience. Bertold realised it was a waste of time. German armour and artillery was so powerful, it would destroy the likes of his small fortification in a matter of a few hours.

"What a waste," Bertold muttered as he sheltered from the German pot-shots. The tree he was using as a shield and the small grassy de-

pression were probably used by a French soldier in 1914, the last time the Germans attacked in force.

"Perhaps everything's a waste," a deep voice said, with a distinct American twang to it.

Bertold turned his head back, making sure he kept his profile as flat as possible. He was greeted by Nader's broad smile. "What are you doing here, Monsieur Nader? I told you to stay back at the fort, inside it, not wandering around."

"I'm a war correspondent, Capitaine, I write about war, not campfires and burning sausages."

"Burning? Francois!" Bertold immediately forgot the threat of the German snipers and started bellowing for his cook. "Where are you? You damn fool! You're burning my sausages. You're not a cook, you're a murderer!"

"Don't worry, I took them off the fire. They're fine, just a little singed. My momma was a fine cook. My grandma, though born a slave, was an even better cook. I come from a lengthy line of superb cooks."

Bertold settled back and turned fully towards Nader. "Your family were slaves?"

"Of course. I'm a negro. I didn't come from a long line of settlers, my folks were clubbed, chained, dragged, drugged, and transported against their wishes. We were stock, herd animals, chattel to be bought, worked, and sold. I'm from America's deep south, and believe me, there are still many there who would welcome the return of slavery."

Bertold was aghast at the thought. "It is wrong, yet you say this so matter of fact. This is incredible that such things happened."

"What do you want me to do? Sugar coat it? All European nations played some part in the slave trade. Some more than others. Some, who instigated the slave trade, turned against it and were instrumental in stopping the trade. Britain being one of them, France a few decades

later. No, my friend, it is what it is. No point ignoring it, like the way you're ignoring the German over there."

Bertold saw Nader's nod and twisted to look round. A German soldier in full canvas combat gear stood up, took another pot-shot, turned, and disappeared.

"Why didn't you shoot him," Nader asked.

"I don't want to kill anyone," Bertold said.

It was Nader's turn to be surprised. He shook his head. "This is going to be an interesting war when it breaks out."

"Exactly! We are not at war and so far, nobody has been hurt. So, we sit and wait until our Generals tell us to fight, to kill."

Nader smiled. "If you say so," he said, patting under his left armpit. "But I'll just keep my trusty Colt loaded and ready in case the Germans missed the news we are not at war."

"You are armed?"

"I am."

"Then I pray, shoot the enemy when he is an enemy, and not before. To kill another human is not something we should do lightly."

Nader feigned surprise. "Sir, I have no intention of killing anyone. I am here only as a journalist."

"Then, mon ami, stay a journalist and let us, the professionals keep you safe. Come, we must rescue my sausages from Francois." The Frenchman paid scant regard to any German snipers and stood up, quickly turning towards where his men guarded their section of the Maginot line.

Nader backed away from the comforting shield of the tree and followed the captain back from the illusional front-line.

I'll do what I do best, but I reserve the right to defend myself when this war finally breaks out into the almighty conflagration it seems it is going to become.

The smell of cooking, especially the sausage of Capitaine Bertold, wafted through the forest edge and led the two men to the small clearing before the fort that was Ouvrage Schoenenbourg.

“Francoise. Have you killed my sausage?”

Bertold’s erstwhile manservant and now his trusted batman in the French army shook his head, still moving the sausages around the pan.

“Non, capitaine. I do not kill the sausage. I enhance the flavour.”

“What have you done to them?”

“He has done nothing, Capitaine. I showed him the slow cook way my mama cooked sausage.”

“Then you know more than he does, monsieur. He has always burned my sausage. Every morning, for years, even in my father’s employ, he burned the sausage.”

Francoise snickered. “That I did.”

“But the taste was incredible. He burned everything, it seemed. But he was a master at disguising the burning and making it all taste so good.”

“That I did, monsieur,” Francois said again, with a broad smile.

“Come. We eat,” Capitaine Bertold said, patting Nader on the back.

Chapter Fifteen

Friends in High Places

Bexhill RAF Station, England, July 1939

Jessie considered herself lucky in some respects and unlucky in others. Life was black and white, good, or bad. There was no grey area, or periods of indifference or maybes about any situation. As a student of history, and in particular the Tudor period, she understood the fundamental nature of knowledge, reality, and existence. Elizabeth I and her ministers were adept at gaining knowledge from Tudor spies and traitors. Applying that knowledge to any given situation, they then made her realm, and therefore her reign, more secure. There were, to her, no grey areas. Equally in such an academic discipline as Jessie's, there were no grey areas. To Jessie, the study of history was purely an academic route to a degree. Real life was far removed for historical study. Life was a walk through a black and white tapestry of ever-changing circumstances.

She applied her philosophy of life to her own actions and those around her.



Within hours Jessie was seated on a British RAF flight to Paris, it was proof, to her, that her theory was correct. Because her father was a high-ranking military attaché, he could pull strings and get her a training flight from Bexhill to Paris. That was proof of the black and white nature of life. She was going to get a flight or not, there was never a maybe.

Of course, sat in the belly of the cramped Bristol Blenheim all thoughts of philosophy were far removed from her thoughts. The dirty floor with its makeshift seating meant Jessie was literally flying by the seat of her pants.

Philosophy doesn't quite cover this situation.

"You realise I could end up in trouble for this," the flight engineer shouted over his shoulder to Jessie.

"Why so?"

"This is a training flight for our esteemed trainee co-pilot, and we aren't supposed to land, just navigate round Melun Villaroche Aerodrome and then home to Bexhill."

"What do you suggest? Have you got a parachute?"

The engineer shrugged his shoulders, glanced at the pilot, who also shrugged.

"Prepare for landing," the pilot said.



The crew didn't bother with any formal goodbyes to Jessie. As the aircraft was brought to a stop at the end of the airfield's single strip runway, the crew opened the door for Jessie, waited for her to get out, then shut the door as she walked clear of the plane.

The engines powered up, and the aircraft turned and raced back down the runway, soaring into the air, and was gone from sight within minutes.

Jessie stood with her suitcase and waited, wondering where her uncle was.

She didn't have to wait long. She heard the car's engine before she saw it. A classy Bentley sports car came into view along the boundary of the airfield. The British Racing Green livery shone in the summer afternoon sun. The car was big.

A bit like the owner.

Within a minute the driver had stopped the car and put the hand-brake on. A tall, slightly rotund man, got out and walked round to the passenger side on the left of the Bentley.

"Hello, kiddo. How are you, Jessie?" he said loudly holding his arms apart ready for a hug.

"Really, Uncle Nev, when are you going to realise, you're far too old for driving around in this beast."

Jessie's slight put down was soon followed by a big smile as she embraced her uncle, being enveloped in the broad expanse of his arms.

"Pleasant journey?"

Jessie pulled away from her uncle and looked up to him, her slight frame and relatively low height, compared to his colossal frame and tall body was a real contrast.

"Not really, damn plane was freezing, and I hated the conversation."

Nev frowned at his niece. "For one so pretty you can be a little cutting with your remarks. I suppose you rubbed them up the wrong way?"

"Moi," Jessie said in a dismissive tone, walking round the big Bentley to the passenger side. "You should get something more sedate, at your age," Jessie said, opening the door and climbing in.

Nev got into the driver's side and settled himself in. "There you go again," looking sidelong at Jessie. "Always the cutting remarks. You don't know you're doing it, do you?"

Jessie returned her uncles look and fluttered her eyelashes. "Would you prefer a more demure, brain-dead niece?"

With a shake of his head, Nev started the engine and put the car into gear. The 4.7 litre engine purred with a low growl and the car's back wheels spun as Nev applied the power. The big car's rear end snaked a little until the tyres gained traction and the vehicle gathered speed.

"What happened to your hair?"

"Not you too. You're all ganging up on me because I did what I wanted to do with my hair."

"Who else?"

"Your brother," Jessie said with a sullen sigh.

"Hardly a gang. Takes half a dozen at least."

"Uncle Nev, do you like my hair?"

"Seen worse."

Jessie gave her uncle a lopsided smile.

"It went wrong, didn't it?"

"Yes uncle, thank you for asking and thank you for your concern."

"What colour should it have been?"

"Auburn."

"Oh well, better luck next time, Jessie."

The pair looked at each other and laughed.

"And why would I give this up for a sedate car? If you can go peroxide blond, I can get a few more kicks out of this car." Nev shouted over the noise the open cockpit allowed in.

“Where are we stopping off?”

“A little place outside Reims. We’ll lay over for the night and then up early, breakfast and back on the road. We should get to Midnight at around six.”

Jessie laughed. “That always sounds weird, get to Midnight at whatever time.”

“It does, doesn’t it.”

Jessie grinned at her uncle and pointed ahead. “Onwards, dear uncle. Onwards!”

Chapter Sixteen

Marcel Shoots the Breeze

Somewhere in France, July 1939

It was a long drive and Marcel, being Marcel, decided he needed to stop as the light was fading. Truth be known, the light wasn't fading, it wouldn't fade for another two hours. But Marcel being Marcel, persuaded himself he needed a drink. That was Marcel's first mistake.

He pulled the car over at the very next village because it seemed to house a decent Café. Marcel parked the car, exited the car, and made his way to the Café and one of the few empty tables and chairs outside. Marcel, a large man with ample padding in the waist, sat down with a sigh. He pulled out a copy of his two-day-old Daily Telegraph, skimming over the front-page headlines.

“Monsieur, s'il vous plaît?”

Marcel looked up at the barman. “Ah, my good man. A glass of Toni-Kola if you please.”

“Oui, monsieur,” the barman said with a slight bow and turned to leave.

Despite his French name, Marcel was as British as beans on toast, and had a penchant for the famed full English breakfast. This also explained his large girth. Marcel loved to play the wealthy Englishman abroad, but rarely had the chance to do so. Today, and tomorrow was to be an exception. He had until tomorrow evening to return to the Embassy in Paris and though he was supposed to be staying at the Fordham's holiday home overnight, a quick phone call would secure permission to stay in a Café with a spare bed for the night, and obviously it would need to provide Marcel with an ample breakfast, preferably one leaning towards an English breakfast and not one that left one starving.

"Croissant, indeed," Marcel muttered to himself.

That was Marcel's plan. Marcel being Marcel, things did not quite work out that way.

As the evening wore on, Marcel took to engaging conversation, as best he could with his schoolboy French, with the locals who seemed more than happy to listen to Marcel's exploits at the British Embassy in Paris.

The telephone call to the embassy for permission to stay in a bed-and-breakfast, the delivery of the package and his aplomb in dealing with locals all abandoned Marcel, his common sense also took a hike, and the locals were left dealing with a loudmouthed braggart who hated the French, hated his job, hated his boss and hated himself. The ensuing fist fight between Marcel and two local farmers ended in a phone call to the local Sûreté. Marcel, being Marcel, did not come quietly.

Chapter Seventeen

Blackmail

Latin Quarter, Paris, July 1939

The clouds scurried across the blue sky as Simeon Moreau looked up while sipping his red wine. It was a pleasant spring day, warm but with a chill. The clouds, moving fast and high were cirrus clouds, wispy and feathery.

Moreau was in Paris' Latin Quarter, seated at a small round table, occupying one of two chairs of a seedy café. The table was closest to the small café's door. He was seated there for a reason and the reason had just arrived.

"Weather's going to change," a man's voice said.

"You could be right, monsieur," Moreau said.

"Is this seat occupied?"

Still Moreau didn't look up. He was waiting for the man to say a certain phrase. A trigger phrase.

"Non, monsieur. The seat is vacant."

Now, will he say it?

"In that case. I will join you."

Bon. That was the first trigger phrase.

The man sat down and said nothing.

Moreau finally looked at him. Not thin, not fat, but potential for chubbiness in old age. The man was obviously shortish and had a distinct look.

Maybe English. But could be a Pole. Wait and see.

“Are you here, in Paris, on holiday?”

Wait for the second trigger sentence.

“Yes, I’m here with my wife.” The man paused for a few seconds. “We are staying at Le Monde.”

That’s it. It’s him. There is no Monde hotel in Paris.

Moreau closed and folded his broadsheet newspaper. He folded it once more and placed it on the small table, next to his glass of house wine.

“Do you have it?” Moreau asked, looking the man in the eye, defying him to say no.

“I do. Do you have this proof of yours?”

“I do.”

The two men sat looking at each other.

A waiter, a small wizened old man, probably the owner, too old to know when to retire, too poor to employ someone else to wait on the tables. “Monsieur?”

The man sat opposite Moreau waved the waiter away with a flutter of his right hand, not even bothering to look at the waiter.

The waiter’s shoulders dropped. He shrugged and turned away.

As the waiter left, the man gave him a sideways glance, making sure he was out of earshot. He turned back to look at Moreau. “Walk with me,” he said, then stood up.

Moreau had a sudden rush of panic. This was not an agreed action. All he was supposed to do was hand over the cash and Moreau would hand over the evidence of his spying. Simple. But now Moreau’s quar-

ry was walking away. Moreau stood up, left his newspaper, and quickly caught up to the man.

“What are you doing,” he hissed, stooping slightly because his quarry was shorter.

“I’m happy to pay you,” the man said. “Ten thousand francs is not a problem. But I need assurances this, information, will not reach certain important people.”

“I will give you the photographs, happily. There are no copies, I assure you.”

“Fine,” the man said. “Then you won’t mind walking a few metres with me. I don’t carry ten thousand francs on me. We need to go to an address near the Seine, not far from Pont Neuf.”

Moreau was finding it had to keep up with the shorter man, who was striding out forcefully. “Very well, but I am not happy at this turn of events. Not happy at all. I’m only a photographer. A journalist.”

“Don’t worry, it’s not far. Just down this side street and there, you can just see the Île de la Cité at the end of the street.”

“Yes, of course. I’m happy to accompany you,” Moreau said, feeling distinctly unhappy.

“Good. You will be home before you know it. And I assume you have the photographs on you?”

“Of course. Of course. In my jacket pocket,” he said, patting the left side of his chest.

The man smiled inwardly as he continued to stride down the small street.



“We have a body.”

Inspector Durand sighed, sipped his coffee, placed the cup in the saucer and stood up from his desk.

“Where, Bernard?”

Bernard Laurent, Durand’s sergeant, and right-hand man flicked through his notes, “Île de la Cité. In a small garden. No, a tree in a small garden.”

“A tree? Do we have a dead body in a tree? That’s a new one.”

“Yes, He was stabbed once in the neck. Severed his juggler. By the position of the body, it seems he was pushed over the edge of the Pont Neuf, where the body fell and lodged in the tree. I assume the murderer was trying to get the body into the river. He seems to have misjudged the position.”

“Have we got a name,” Durand asked, putting on his overcoat. At sixty years old, he was beginning to feel the cold increasingly. He was looking forward to retiring.

“His name is Moreau, Simeon Moreau. He’s a...”

“Photographer. I know him. Or rather I know of him. Apparently incredibly good at weddings and special events. Does some freelance work for newspapers.”

“How do you know so much about him?”

Durand had finally got his overcoat on and was following his sergeant out of the office. “My niece is getting married. Apparently, it is going to be a society wedding and her mother wanted to employ Moreau to do the photographs.”

Laurent gave a short snicker. “Looks like she will need to look again. I’ve got an old box brownie if she would like me to do the honours.”

“That’s not funny, sergeant,” Durand said, inwardly smiling himself. “Was it a theft? Pickpocket gone wrong, do you think.”

“Well, that’s the funny thing. It seems it was theft but the policeman who attended says the man’s jacket pocket was ripped open...”

"Indicating a theft," Durand said as they walked down the office stairs to the front door.

"Yes, but it doesn't look like the thief got away with the wallet. It was in another pocket. No, what he got away with is half a brown envelope of photographs, for his troubles."

"He must have been disturbed then."

"Seems so. What a waste. To kill someone and get away with a handful of photographs."

"That's life," Durand said, wincing at the shallow sunlight as he walked out into the street.

"That's death," Laurent.

"You're a real cynic, sergeant."

Chapter Eighteen

It Runs in the Family

Reims, France, July 1939

Jessie woke to the sound of clattering cups on saucers, being wheeled on a squeaky trolley in the hotel she and her uncle were staying at. Turning over in her bed and wondering where she was. “Oh,” she groaned, “too much brandy.”

After a few moments reflection on the merits of a wayward uncle offering his aspiring wayward niece copious amounts of brandy, Jessie rolled over and looked at the bedside clock.

“Eight O’ Clock, oh for heaven’s sake, who invented early mornings.”

She had promised her uncle to be up and ready for breakfast at eight in the morning, and now she was running round the room, throwing clothing from her travel bag onto the bed and generally making a mess trying to find something to wear.

Nev, on the other hand, was on his second coffee of the morning and his stomach was growling fiercely. When Jessie finally walked in the room, he felt relieved and quickly turned to grab the attention of the lone waitress.

“More coffee and breakfast for two, please,” Nev said in his finest *not-to-draw-attention* Englishman abroad accent. He turned to his flustered niece. “Did you sleep well?”

“I did, like a log, and thanks to you for plying me with brandy.”

The smell of fresh coffee and croissants and jam arrived before the waitress.

“It’s a remedy for stress,” Nev said, cutting into his croissant.

“What, a croissant?” Jessie said with a smile.

“Could be. No, I meant the brandy. You seemed, how shall I say it, stressed.”

Jessie sipped her coffee and cut into her own croissant. “Wouldn’t you be stressed sitting on the floor of an old RAF training aircraft for an hour or so?”

Nev sipped his coffee then took a larger gulp. “Yes, I suppose I would, but that’s not what stressed you, is it.”

“No, it was the usual stuff. Cambridge stuff and... well.”

“Dad stuff?”

“Always dad stuff.”

“He’s a complex man, your dad. It runs in the family.”

“Complex? You can say that again. And you can talk, you’re sometimes more complicated to work out than dad is. All this spy stuff you two are into.”

“Was, in my case. Was. You know I had to give it up for, well...”

“Health reasons. That is, if you had carried on, they would have hung you.”

“Shush, not so loud.”

“There’s no one around who can hear us.”

“You may believe that my girl, but I know better. There is always someone around who can hear us and who will use any juicy tittle-tat-

tle to entrap and leverage information out of you. So be careful when you join the government merry-go-round.”

Jessie looked around the small hotel cafeteria. “There’s nobody about, except the waitress.”

“Exactly,” Nev said, looking round himself. “It’s the most innocent looking people who are the most dangerous, believe me.”

“Besides,” Jessie said, leaning back in her chair. “I’m not joining any government department. I’ve decided to be a journalist. I’ll report on the spies rather than be one.”

“Then here’s to your new career, my girl. Good luck to you, and god help anyone getting in your way.”

“There are only two people who stand in my way. My dad and Armel.”

“But for varied reasons. You still blame Armel for your mother’s death and you still think she was having an affair with your dad?”

Jessie took a bite from her croissant, and sipped her coffee, not taking her eye off her uncle. “I know they were having an affair,” she said, placing her cup back in the saucer.

“Can we have some more coffee, please,” Nev said, waving to the yawning waitress. “I’m not convinced. However, your main focus is your dad, am I right.”

“Yes, because he wants to control my life, all the time. He’s pushed me all my life to be better than I am. Swimming, running, judo, shooting and lots of other stuff. At times I felt I was in the army. And the same with school. Always pushing there. Private boarding school is like the army. Then at Cambridge. No chance of joining a group doing painting or comedy or reading, writing. No, the socialist society was his idea of a fun time. I soon told them where to get off.”

Nev waited as the waitress appeared with the coffee and had placed fresh cups in front and took the used cups away. “Your father has

always wanted the best for you, but he's probably gone about getting the best without considering what you want out of life."

"Exactly. Well said that man," Jessie said, pouring fresh black coffee into their cups, the aroma tantalising her nose.

"His methods are singular and maybe a little, I don't have the words."

"Underhand, sneaky, pushy, to think of but a few. It was like I said, almost like being in the army. And for heaven's sake, who puts their daughter through a course of unarmed combat. I mean, honestly uncle."

"Really? When was this?"

"Last year. He did it himself. You were off on one of your trips to who knows where and he got it into his head I should be able to look after myself when I join the foreign office. Number one I am not joining the foreign office and number two I do not want to be taught unarmed combat by anyone, last of all my father. And another thing, even if I did join the foreign office I would not voluntarily wrestle with an ambassador."

"Calm down and quieten down, my girl."

"Well, I ask you," Jessie hissed, taken a large gulp of hot coffee. "Ow, that's hot!"

"Yes, it's the little things we should take notice of in life, lest they hurt us."

Jessie's brow furrowed at her uncle's remark.

"I mean, we all have ulterior motives in what we do and say sometimes. Unarmed combat seems a little over the top. A little too zealous," Nev said.

"Zealous? Downright crazy if you ask me. No, my dad has done his best for me for an education, but the constant pushing. It was almost like he had a guideline he was following."

Nev visibly blushed as Jessie spoke, which she noticed immediately.

“What? Have I hit some secret family nerve?”

Nov shook his head. “No, not at all. It just seemed funny to think of Albert consulting a book of rules to follow for your welfare.”

Jessie smiled at that, but noticed Nev was still blushing and averting his eyes. Something was up. A nerve, a secret nerve, had been touched and Jessie was determined to find the underlying cause of it.



Breakfast over, bags repacked and rooms vacated, Nev paid the bill and the pair of them got into the Bentley and made for the open road towards their destination, the Midnight Lake.

It was a warm and breezy drive through many small and pretty villages, followed by narrow roads with high raised hedgerows either side. What traffic they met was mainly farmers with horse and cart. On one occasion they came across a broken-down tractor that turned out to be a Renault Tank from the last war, converted into a tractor.

“It’s a beauty of a machine,” Nev said, as he and Jessie sat in their car patiently waiting for the farmer and a local mechanic trying to get the tractor going. It was a long wait, but there was no way round the large machine. So, the pair made themselves as comfortable as possible in their seats and waited.

“So, when are you going to go to Journalism school?”

“Ah, now that’s a touchy subject.”

“I can guess why,” Nev said with a smile.

“Yes, it all comes down to money. My allowance from dad does not quite cover the expense of London University Journalism School.”

“Ah, the good old fees system. You pay, you learn. Not quite the setup your socialist dad envisaged for the world.”

“Socialist? Dad? Really?”

“Well, not quite committed,” Nev said with an embarrassed har-rumph as he sat up in his seat.

“I never knew that. But that explains him always banging on about the socialists at Cambridge. I never, ever, equated that to dad *being* a socialist. That is wild, uncle.”

“Yes, well... oh look, I think they’ve got it going.”

In a flurry of grey smoke, the tractor’s engine burst into life and with a wave, both the mechanic and tractor driver drove away.

Nev turned on his own engine, put it noisily into gear and slowly followed the mechanic’s old van, the farmers even older tractor and a flurry of grey smoke emanating from the tractor.

But Jessie was oblivious to all this as she began to wonder about her father’s politics. A subject that had never occurred to her before, but that was now very much on her mind.

Chapter Nineteen

Escaping The Black Chamber

Poznań Army Command, Poland, July 1939

By July 1939, the Black Chamber team began preparations to evacuate key personnel and equipment from Poland. They destroyed all sensitive documents and equipment. An evacuation train was organised and transported them to the south. It wasn't long before the train crossed the border into Romania.

Soon, the train had gone as far as it could and the team were put into a truck for transport to France. The situation was very fluid as information on a possible invasion changed continually, consequently their route was continually in flux. They had made several telephone calls to France, trying to gain confirmation that France would not only accept them as refugees, but also integrate them into the French effort to break the Enigma codes.

Their journey was interrupted as their single very crowded truck was confiscated at the border by a Romanian officer. To make matters

worse, the military personnel in their group were separated from the civilian personnel.

Taking advantage of the confusion, Jankowski decided the three mathematicians should ignore the Romanian's instructions. They realised they would end up in an internment camp unless they took matters into their own hands. The fear was they would be identified by Romanian security police, knowing full well that Germany's Abwehr and SD had informers in Romanian security.

The trio and a Polish army officer escaped in the confusion and went to the nearest railroad station. There they bought tickets for the first train headed south. After many hours they finally reached Bucharest in the south of the country. Their intention was to get to the British embassy and ask for asylum. On arrival they were told by diplomatic staff to *'come back in a few days.'* They then tried the French embassy, introducing themselves and asking to speak with a French military officer. A French Army colonel telephoned Paris and then issued instructions for the Poles to be assisted in evacuating to Paris.

The news of Jankowski's team coming to Paris eventually came to the attention of Albert Fordham. Realising the significance of this, Albert made his plans and informed Armel he would want access to the Polish code breakers. Armel immediately followed Albert's instructions and a meeting was arranged.

Albert would soon, he hoped, have full access to the work the Poles had carried out on Enigma.



“As I understand it, you have cracked the Enigma code, or at least, you have worked out how the Nazi machine works, but you haven’t yet built a working machine,” Albert Fordham said to the young Polish mathematician sat opposite him. They were in a side office in the British Embassy.

The young man nodded, leaning forward across the table separating the two. “Yes, yes. If we had the equipment and access to engineers, I’m sure we will be able to build a machine in no time.” The intense young man fumbled with his round spectacles, taking out a handkerchief and wiping the lenses. He crumpled the handkerchief and shoved it unceremoniously in his trouser pocket, placing the glasses on his face with the other hand. “Can you help us achieve this?”

Albert smiled and inwardly thanked the stars for this stroke of good fortune. “Of course I can, but what I want from you is your notes and any equipment you have pertaining to Enigma.”

“Our notes and equipment? Why?”

“War has been declared. You are not safe here in France and I want to get you to Britain as soon as possible. But I also need to ensure your work is not destroyed if you should be shot down over the channel.”

Jankowski considered this for a few moments, then nodded his head. “Yes, yes, I see your point. I need to gather the team, sort out what we can let you have and...”

“Today,” Albert said, butting in. “You must get them to me today in case we have to evacuate at a moment’s notice.”

Jankowski looked taken aback and was about to speak when Albert held his hand up for silence. “No. No objections. I have a team of people ready to transcribe and they are here, ready and waiting. This must be completed as soon as possible. I also have a photographer to ensure we have a complete itinerary. I must leave shortly; I have a prior engagement. But I’m not leaving you three here.”

“What about our military escort,” Zosia said.

“What about him? He can kick his heels here for a while. We may even let him enjoy the Paris nightlife... under escort of course. But you three will be my guests at my house. We are holding a party for the British Ambassador and we don’t want you three wandering around the streets of Paris. You are too valuable an asset.”

Chapter Twenty

von Ribbentrop & Hitler

Reichstag Building, Berlin, July 1939

There was no plan, no master plan as such. Hitler gave out vague comments in passing and his entourage ensured these comments became policy and then became law and or a general and vague plan. But there was never a master plan.

The invasion of France was a given, Germany had been aiming at that for years, even before the last war. But after that it would be down to the generals to make suggestions and see where this led the army and air force. The Navy? Oh, they could tag along and make themselves useful if the army attacked and invaded Britain.

Germany's Joachim von Ribbentrop, the last German ambassador to Great Britain, was sitting with his master, Adolf Hitler, drinking coffee and deciding on the direction of Hitler's new Reich.

As von Ribbentrop poured another coffee for himself and Hitler, topping his own off with a dash or two of cognac from his hipflask, a

British invention he wholeheartedly embraced, he broached a subject that Hitler found somewhat tedious.

“Shall we talk about the news that the British may have broken our main military code,” von Ribbentrop said, taking a sip from his coffee cup.

Hitler stared at his *Foreign Minister of the Reich* and sighed. “Must we?”

“It’s important, my Führer. Especially important.”

Hitler loved playing at being a general in the army, his army, but found the minutia of military life tedious. “I’m sure my people know what they are doing. If there is need of any intervention on my part, then I will be told and action will be taken.”

“But by then the British will have...”

“You have too much time for the British, you are now my Foreign Minister and there are more countries in the world, other than Britain, which require your attention. Have another coffee and do not bother yourself.”

Joachim von Ribbentrop sat back and drank his coffee. There was no arguing with the Führer when he was in an expansive mood. von Ribbentrop knew the British well, had spent many years admiring their ways and their organisational capabilities. In particular, the fact Britain had an active intelligence network since the time of Queen Elizabeth I, told anyone who studied them that the British knew more secrets than anyone could, or should, know.

The Führer called for an aide to provide music on the record player, preferably Wagner.

While the Valkyries rode, von Ribbentrop realised the coming war was almost certainly lost before it even began.

Chapter Twenty-One

Inga

The Midnight Lake, Ardennes, France, July 1939

Jessie shut the Bentley's door and watched as her uncle carved a semi-circle in the rough chipping track that made up the inner quadrangle to the house entrance. Her uncle would park his beloved car in the old stables mews, a similar old stable her father used for his official car. Sandwiched between was the storage area and cycle racks, as each family member and member of staff had their own bicycles. Jessie knew her uncle would be there several hours, lovingly cleaning off any dust that dared land on his beloved automobile.

Jessie decided a bath, food, and a nap where in order and slowly made her way into the house, opening and shutting the front door quietly so as not to alert her siblings she had arrived.

Walking up the oak staircase that was the central feature to the foyer, Jessie could make out the top room, her father's office, was occupied. A shadow was visible on the upper parts of the white ceiling. Someone was in the office moving around and by the sounds of it, they seemed to search for something.

Jessie crept up the stairs quietly, hoping to catch the intruder single-handed.

Surely that would be worth a few points of self-esteem with my father.

As she reached the landing at the top of the stairs, Jessie peered into the office. Her father hated people invading his space, and this certainly seemed like a good fit for getting into his bad books.

She entered the office.

"Where are you?" That was from a female voice with an accent.

"Inga?" Jessie said in a raised voice.

A loud bump from under her father's desk followed. "Ow!"

Jessie smiled as the top of a head appeared, with eyes that reached the level of the mahogany desk.

Inga Rosberg, Colonel Fordham's nanny to her younger siblings, peeked above the desk. "Miss Jessie! How nice to see you again."

"Inga, what are you doing on the floor?"

"Leave her alone. She's working for me." The tinny male voice came from the telephone receiver sat in the middle of a pile of papers on Colonel Fordham's desk. The voice was that of the colonel.

Jessie leaned down to the telephone handset. "I would not interfere, only mention that it will take a week to clear this mess up, but then you are used to that, aren't you dad?"

"I'll tidy up," Inga said.

"No, you won't," Fordham's tinny voice shouted. "Just find what I want, Inga, and don't let my daughter intimidate you."

Inga stood up and shrugged her shoulders.

"I'll leave you to it, Inga," Jessie said with a broad smile. "Good luck. Whatever it is he wants I'll bet it's not here but in his office in Paris."

Inga nodded; she too knew the colonel's predilection for losing valuable documents. "The water is hot, Miss Jessie."

Jessie smiled. "You read my mind, Inga. Thank you. Bye dad," she shouted at the phone handset. "I'll see you at the weekend."

"Don't forget," the tinny voice shouted. "Your step-sister is with us for the first time since her father died. Do not be too hard on her."

"Yes, yes. See you soon, dad."



A long soak in the bath. A chicken sandwich and a well-earned nap gave Jessie a new lease of life and she wandered the house looking for her siblings and step-sister.

She came across Inga who told her the children were on a trip in the woods, except for Tim who had a tummy upset and was in bed. The rest were foraging for mushrooms, truffles, and anything else that they could find for their evening meal. They were with the gamekeeper and cook, Maurice and Madame Noire, and would not be back until late.

Jessie wandered the corridors of the house, originally an old religious sanctuary built into the hillside above the Midnight Lake. The corridors were part of an enormous labyrinth, now a home, but two hundred years ago a place for both pilgrimage and for solitude.

Jessie was wondering about the people who lived here, in the 17th century, and why the place eventually fell into ruin, when she found herself back outside her father's office.

She could see from the doorway that Inga had tried to clean up, but probably made it worse.

Dad will love this!

Jessie walked into the office, a strictly out-of-bounds place when her father was in residence, but when the cat is away! The paper strewn mahogany desk, with its red leather oblong inlay and this offset by the

dark blue carpet all spoke to Jessie of her father. There was no room for any other influence here, neither herself, her mother or stepmother affected her father's office. At odds with the paper-strewn desk was the rest of the office. An occasional table was empty of any debris, two chairs for visitors likewise, and the carpeted floor itself hid nothing.

Or did it?

Jessie saw out the corner of her eyes, in the far-left corner where a hat and umbrella stand stood, what looked like a briefcase, sat under an umbrella that had fallen and partially opened.

Jessie moved in and scooped up the umbrella, fixing it so it wouldn't open again and then hung it back up on the stand. Looking down once more, she was rewarded with the sight of an old, dark red, briefcase with a central handle, brass locking device and two straps for threading and securing. Above the lock was the device of the British Crown and an ornate GR. George Regina. King George VI.

Now, why is there a diplomatic bag sat in this corner?

Jessie looked left to the opposite corner, at the large brown metal office safe. "You should be in there," she said aloud, walking round the desk to the safe. As she stood in front of the safe, she placed the diplomatic bag on top, realising for the first time it was a little heavy. Trying the lock on the bag, she wasn't surprised to find it was locked. She tried the safe as well, with the same result. Jessie stood back and regarded the safe.

**Thomas Withers & Sons
Ltd
West Bromwich
England**

The nameplate at the front announced who the manufacturer was on a splendidly ornate brass plaque.

Jessie picked up the briefcase. "Well, old chum, you had better come and stay with me in my room. Just in case dad has the crown jewels hidden away inside you."

Jessie walked out of the office, across the landing and down into the bowels of the house, on her way to her own room.

She never noticed Inga, or the look of dismay on the Nannie's hardened features, as she watched Jessie leave.

Chapter Twenty-Two

The Man in Black

The Midnight Lake, Ardennes, France, July 1939

The lane running alongside the Fordham house, close to Roc la Tour, led south to Tournavaux or west to Monthermé in the Ardennes Forest. It fell to Jessie, as she had always done since her early teens, to cycle to the town of Naux. It had a scattering of farms and most importantly a boulangerie and boucherie, where she would buy the daily requirement of bread and meat. Both the butcher and baker's family had got to know Jessie well over the years and Jessie spent longer buying food than any other pastime while on holiday.

On her way back from her morning trip, Jessie revelled in free-wheeling down the hill with pine trees lining both sides of the small lane. The early morning scent of pine mixed with the warming dappled sunlight made her grateful to be alive.

As she approached the narrow entrance to the family home, the driveway partially hidden by the pine trees, Jessie could see a small black Simca Cinq car parked on the right side, its rear-end toward her and two men stood with their backs to her at the front of the vehicle. The two men had not noticed Jessie's silent approach and Jessie was

almost at the entrance to the driveway when she realised one man was her uncle. The other was dressed head to foot in black. A black fedora pulled low down on his head, a black gabardine mac, collar up, pulled tight around his neck and black trousers and shoes.

Jessie considered his dress sense was more for dramatic and menacing effect than that of a disguise.

Jessie steered the bicycle left, and the wheels crunched on the driveway gravel.

The two men turned and for a fleeting moment, Jessie saw the man in black's face. A pinched nose, thin black moustache and dark, swarthy eyes that flitted left and right, looking for danger.

Her uncle's expression was telling. Shock and realisation he had been caught doing something he would have preferred to keep quiet.

Jessie stopped the bicycle and put a foot down. "Uncle, what's wrong?"

Her uncle waved a hand to Jessie, said something to the man in black, and then walked over to join her.

"He was lost," her uncle said, "and wanted directions to Monthermé."

"Oh," Jessie said, her brow furrowed. She stood next to her uncle while the pair watching the man get in his car, start the engine, and drive off. "He paid little attention to your directions, he's going the wrong way, he's on his way to Tournavaux."

Nev Fordham looked over his shoulder at the receding car and shrugged his shoulders. He smiled at Jessie. "Never mind, he was foreign, he will find his way, eventually."

Jessie watched her uncle walk slowly down the drive to the house. She mused on the odd turn of events based on an uncle who left the house at odd times, to drive somewhere in his beloved Bentley to who knew where. And the odd turn of events in that she was certain she

heard the two men speak German, not a language she felt her uncle was fluent in or knew enough to make himself understood.

Jessie fully dismounted the bicycle and pushed it down the drive, quickly catching up to her uncle.

The pair walked in silence towards the house, Jessie's mind slightly confused by what she had just witnessed.

Chapter Twenty-Three

Shots in the Dark

The Ardennes, France, July 1939

The drive of two hundred kilometres from Paris was going to take over three hours, mainly in the dark, but the Fordham's weren't bothered with that, it was good to be so far away from the Embassy. And it was good to know that nobody from the embassy was tempted to take the drive to the Fordham's summer house on official business.

Albert changed down a gear as the old Humber Snipe struggled to maintain speed on the meandering tiny country lanes that led to the Midnight Lake.

"You know, we really should have stayed at our posts," Armel said from the passenger seat, stifling a yawn at the same time.

"There are many things I should have done in my life, yet here I am, still alive and kicking. Besides, we both have permission from our superiors."

"Yes, but..."

"Yes, but nothing. We need a break and I need to make sure my stupid error hasn't caused me more grief to come."

Armel smiled at the seriousness of her husband's face.

If it's not by the book, you think it's wrong.

"It will be fine. Don't worry so much."

Albert snatched a glance at his wife. "You know what I'm talking about? Enigma?"

"Yes, I know. The German code machine."

"I trusted it in the hands of Marcel, and what did the fool do? Stop halfway to the lake, go to a bar, and have a few too many aperitifs and then attempt to argue with the locals using his fists. There is only so much a Military Attaché can do for an idiot over a long distance. Luckily, I persuaded the Sûreté to keep him in overnight. At least the diplomatic bag would have been safe."

As the word safe left Albert's lips, a crack and hole appeared in the Humber's windscreen.

"Get down!" Albert shouted as he shifted down a gear and then stepped on the accelerator.

"What?"

"Get down!" Albert shouted once more, grabbing Armel's shoulder, and pushing down with his right hand. "The car behind! Someone is shooting at us!"

Armel didn't need telling twice and kept as low as she could. Albert shrugged himself low, changed gear, and took evasive action.

The change of gear hadn't made a lot of difference to the car's speed, but that and weaving left and right across the narrow country lane would seriously hamper anyone trying to hit them with gunfire. Albert looked in the rear-view mirror and could make out a car following them. The muffled sound of machine gun fire belied the track of bullets hitting the car's forward nearside fender.

"Oh, oh," was all Albert could say as more bullets ripped into the rear of the Humber.

Armel screamed.



Albert knew the narrow road well having travelled it many times before. He knew exactly what to do and waited for the right moment. It came quickly and Albert weaved his car to the left and then right, slammed his foot on the brake, changed down a gear yet again and as the attacking car pulled to his left side, he accelerated, pulled the steering wheel left hard and braced for impact.

The left fender of Albert's car hit the rear offside fender of the attacking vehicle. Albert's car's mass dug in, twisted the rear end of the attacking car round, pushing it through the sparse hedgerow. The car's rear end pulled the whole vehicle down onto a grassy slope.

Albert stopped his car and watched.

The attacker's driver couldn't get a grip on the wet grass and his rear wheels spun madly, sending up slops of turf and mud. The car quickly slipped backwards down the slope.

Albert exited his car, pulled his Smith & Wesson revolver out and aimed at the front windshield of the attacking car. He fired off all the bullets in the chamber, shattering the windshield and hopefully killing the passengers. Not in anger, but in pity. He knew where the car was heading and right on queue gravity took over and the attacking car plunged into the Gorge de Saint Guirec, falling four-hundred metres to be shattered at the bottom. Anyone not killed by Albert's gunfire would not survive the impact.

Albert heard a forlorn scream as at least one man in the car survived Alberts gunfire, long enough to realise he was now heading for his doom.

Chapter Twenty-Four

A Bird in the Hand

The Midnight Lake, Ardennes, France, July 1939

“Knock, knock,” Jessie said as she tapped on Tim’s bedroom door and walked in.

“I’m not well,” a little boy cried out. “I think I’m going to die. Better keep away.”

Jessie pushed the door fully open and the little boy, wearing striped pyjamas saw who his visitor was and leapt out of his bed, bounced off the bed, hit the floor running and jumped into Jessie’s arms.

“Whoa, Tiger! A respectable spot of gymnastics, but you’re only six and a little skinny.”

After a brief cuddle, brother and sister separated and Tim, realising he was desperately ill, moaned and made his slow way back to bed.

Jessie sat on the edge of the bed and appraised the boy. “You don’t look ill, Tim.”

“I am, very. Westing away.”

“Wasting way, Tim, wasting, not westing.”

Tim waved a hand and settled back against his pillows. “Have you brought me a present?”

“Now you’re being cheeky, young man. No, I have not. I brought myself, that should be enough for you.”

Tim smiled.

“Could it be you’re ill because you don’t like mushrooms?”

“Well, yes! What a silly idea searching for mushrooms when I don’t like mushrooms?”

“But all the others like mushrooms.”

“And...”

“And you should consider others over yourself. Life isn’t all about you. It’s about all of us working together. Understand?”

Tim nodded.

“Now, let me read you a story and maybe you’ll fall asleep and feel better in an hour, after a nap.”

“Treasure Island is my favourite.”

“Then Treasure Island it is.” Jessie opened the book and it immediately reminded her of a little girl, lost in the woods, frightened beyond belief by a skull,



Tim had fallen asleep almost at once and Jessie had followed suit almost immediately afterwards.

What woke both up was not the noise of the mushroom hunting party returning from a successful trip into the forest, but the terrible twins crashing into Tim’s bedroom giggling and shouting.

“What the,” Jessie shouted at her rude awakening.

“Only us,” Kit announced to his sister and younger brother.

“You’re in the wrong bedroom, boys,” Jessie said with a bleary-eyed yawn.

"No, we're not!" Jimmy shouted. "We're here to give Tim a present."

"I don't like slimy mushrooms," Tim muttered, sliding down under the bedclothes to avoid his boisterous brothers.

"You'll like this, present. It's not a mushroom."

"Let me see first," Jessie said, beckoning the twins towards her. It was then she noticed Kit had his hands clasped in front of him. "What have you got in your hands, Kit?"

Kit walked forward and raised his hands towards Jessie's head, slightly opening the top hand.

Jessie peered in. "Oh, it's a..."

"Shush," Jimmy admonished.

"What do you think you're going to do with it?" Jessie asked.

"It's injured, I think its wing is hurt or bruised."

At the mention of a wing, Tim was up and out of the bedclothes. "Is it a bird?"

"I think it's a Geai Bleu, a Blue Jay to you," said Madame Noaire, who was standing on the landing outside of Tim's bedroom. "It's only young and unable to fly. It will starve to death or be eaten by a cat if left in the wild. It needs someone to look after it and feed it. Plenty of insects and grubs around this time of year if someone can be bothered to find them. I have a cage, somewhere, that was the home of my pet rat until it died. Plenty big enough for a small bird."

"Until it gets bigger," Jessie said, unhappy at where the conversation was going.

"When it's big enough, fat enough and rested enough, it will be ready to fly away," Madame Noaire said.

"Can I?" Tim shouted at Jessie.

"Tim! Calm down. We'll see."

"Better see soon sis," Kit said with a big smile. "It's here, now, and judging by the rustling of feathers it wants out of my hands. What do you say, Jessie?"

"Yes, Jessie," Jimmy said, "What do you say sis?"

"Yeah, sis," Tim shouted.

"Be careful," Jessie said to Tim, ruffling his hair. "Very well, but I'm having nothing to do with it and we have no way of fixing it if the wing is broken. If it's in pain, it will need putting down."

"No, I'll look after it and it will get better," Tim said with a self-assurance he didn't actually feel.

"On your head, Tim," Jessie said as she stood up and walked out of the bedroom.

With Jessie gone, Tim looked at Kit. Kit looked at Jimmy and Jimmy looked at Madame Noaire.

"Now what?" Tim asked.

"Dunno," the twins said in unison.

Madame Noaire laughed, her roly-poly body quivering as she did so. "Come, Tim. Come and fetch the cage and we will find some bedding and food."

As Tim jumped out of his bed, and ran after Madame Noaire, Kit shouted after him, "What are you going to call it?"

"Bluebeard," Tim shouted back.

"Bluebeard!" Jimmy said.

"Maybe he meant Bluebird," Kit said.

Chapter Twenty-Five

Home

The Midnight Lake, Ardennes, France, July 1939

As the Humber approached the house, the black waters of the lake were calm, not a ripple stirred the deep waters.

The Midnight Lake was surrounded by a dense forest of conifers, where the soft, sometimes boggy forest floor, fed the lake with a constant supply of dark peat laden water, turning the water in the lake black. It was a lake of glacial origin, set close to Roc la Tour in the Ardennes Forest, but kept far from the public eye by the forest itself.

The Fordham holiday home was south facing toward the head of the lake, giving it summer sun for most of the day, from dawn until dusk. To the left was a sprawling orchard of apples and pears. The pears sweet for eating and the apples tart, exactly right for making cider and sometimes calvados if there was enough of a harvest.

Albert pulled the car into the small entrance and drove down to where the garage mews were on the right but didn't stop there. He entered the small courtyard of the Roman style home and stopped the car at the front door. Albert didn't bother parking in the garage and drove into the quadrangle, turning in a slow circle, monitoring

the surrounding area, checking to see if anyone was lurking in the darkness, ready to strike once more.

Armel opened her door before Albert could tell her to wait. She got out of the car and slammed the door shut, stomping off to the front door.

Albert followed his wife into the house.



“Who knew?” Armel, asked, still shaking, and trying to sip on a cognac in her husband’s office. It was in the early hours and even though they had made some noise as they arrived, nobody in the house had stirred.

Albert poured himself a large malt whisky and took a sip. Placing the glass back down on the pop-up cocktail bar table. “Nobody, except you, me, Jessie, and Inga. Oh and Nev.”

“That’s a lot of nobodies not knowing we were on our way to the lake.”

Albert nodded, picked up his drink and paced his office. “And that’s not including the embassy staff. I can’t believe any of them would be capable of telling someone our plans. They’re not spies.”

“How do you know? Your eldest daughter hates me, Inga resents my presence and treats me like a member of the staff and Nev! Well, Nev is indifferent to my existence.”

“This isn’t just about you, Armel. I was in the car as well and to be honest, they were probably after the Enigma devices.”

“What’s Enigma?” A sleepy voice said from the open office doorway.

Albert and Armel turned to see Jessie, arms folded, leaning against the door jamb.

Chapter Twenty-Six

Enigma

The Midnight Lake, Ardennes Forest, France, July 1939

“What did you say?”

Jessie pushed herself away from the door jamb and yawned. “Dad don’t play the innocent. You heard what I said. You would be one poor spy if you couldn’t hear what people were saying to you.”

“Jessie, I keep telling you I am not a spy. I am...”

“Will you two shut up!” Arnel’s shout wasn’t loud, but it was firm. “We were almost killed this evening and for what? A few pieces of a machine that is supposed to win the war.”

“Really?” Jessie was truly incredulous. “Win the war sounds good, except for one problem. We’re not at war.”

“We’ve been at war, a secret war, with German intelligence for years,” Albert said. “By the end of the year, it will be a real, full-scale, war with millions of people killed if we don’t get the device to London.”

Arnel finished her cognac and stood. “I’m going to bed. Play your war games with your daughter, Albert. You two deserve each other.”

After Armel had left the room, Jessie took her seat and poured herself a cognac.

“How long have you been drinking alcohol?”

“Dad, I’m a big girl now and graduated from Cambridge. Or have you forgotten my graduation day already? You don’t graduate from Cambridge without at least twenty-five percent of your time spent propping up a bar in town. Now, what’s her problem and what is Enigma.”

Albert shut the office door and sat himself behind his desk. He felt more in control from that viewpoint.

“Her, problem, and I’m assuming you mean your mother...”

“She is not...”

“Yes! Yes! I know, you have said it a million times. Enough! Armel and I were attacked about three kilometres from here. Machine gun strafed our car from behind. It was, I suspect, a Nazi hit squad trying to run us off the road, capture us and torture us for information on Enigma.”

“Nazi hit squad. What have you got yourself into now, dad? How did you get away?”

“I ran them off the road. Straight through the opening into the high field.”

“But that leads to... oh my god.”

“Yes, the ravine. I assume the car didn’t have wings so tomorrow I need to take Nev with me and find out their exact whereabouts, before I call the local Gendarmes in. I’m assuming all in the car are dead, but that’s impossible to prove.”

“You’re taking this very calmly, dad, I must say,” Jessie said, gulping down a good measure of cognac. She noticed her right-hand trembling as she placed the glass back on the corner of her father’s desk. Until this point, she had only ever seen her father as a dad, in uniform. Now

she saw him as one of His Majesties soldiers, prepared to kill an enemy with deadly force, by any means at hand. Jessie suddenly realised it was a kill or be killed world into which she had graduated. "And Enigma?"

"Top secret. I can't say what it is, but I can say it will make a significant difference to the war. If our boffins can crack... well, figure out how it works, then it will save thousands, if not millions of lives."

"You believe war is coming?"

"It's here, only we aren't calling it war, we're just playing at spies."

Jessie nodded. "I found your diplomatic briefcase in the corner of your office."

"Damn that man."

"Who."

"Someone from the embassy was supposed to bring the bag here and Nev was supposed to put it in the safe. Just wait until he wakes."

"I haven't seen Uncle Nev for a while. Come to think of it, not since I saw him talking to the spy."

"What!"

"Uncle Nev was talking to a man, who was dressed in black. He was in a car and Nev said he wanted directions to Monthermé. Black hat, thin black moustache, all pointing towards a spy. It was odd because when he drove off, he went in the opposite direction to Monthermé."

Albert Fordham sat, thinking, taking in all the odd snippets of information, coupled with the attack on himself and Armel. And now this seemingly innocuous request for directions from a man who was patently not a tourist.

"I think it's time for some sleep."

"I'm wide-awake dad."

"Where is the briefcase?"

"It's safe."

"Good girl, keep it that way and we say no more of it. Except..."

“Yes?”

“If anything should happen to me, you must do your utmost to get that briefcase to England and to a company called Minimax Fire Extinguisher Company at 54 Broadway, near to Birdcage Walk.”

“Minimax Fire Extinguisher Company? What have they got to do with the war effort?”

“It’s a front for the SIS.” Albert sighed when he saw the quizzical look on his daughter’s face. “The Secret Intelligence Service. In my case, MI6.”

“Dad, you’re worrying me now.”

“You must, must, pay attention to what I tell you now, and I can only hope you have the willpower to carry this mission through, if I don’t survive. And primarily, do not trust your uncle Nev or tell him what I’m telling you now. And guard the bag with your life.”

“Talk about enigma, dad.”

“I mean it, Jessie. Guard that bag with your life if I can’t make it back here. Now, listen to me...”