

Loose Id

AGATHA BLAINE

UNDERCOVER PASSION

LUCINDA THORNE

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This book contains explicit sexual content, graphic language, and situations that some readers may find objectionable (suggested homoerotic sex, violence, anal sex, light bondage).

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Luncinda Thorne

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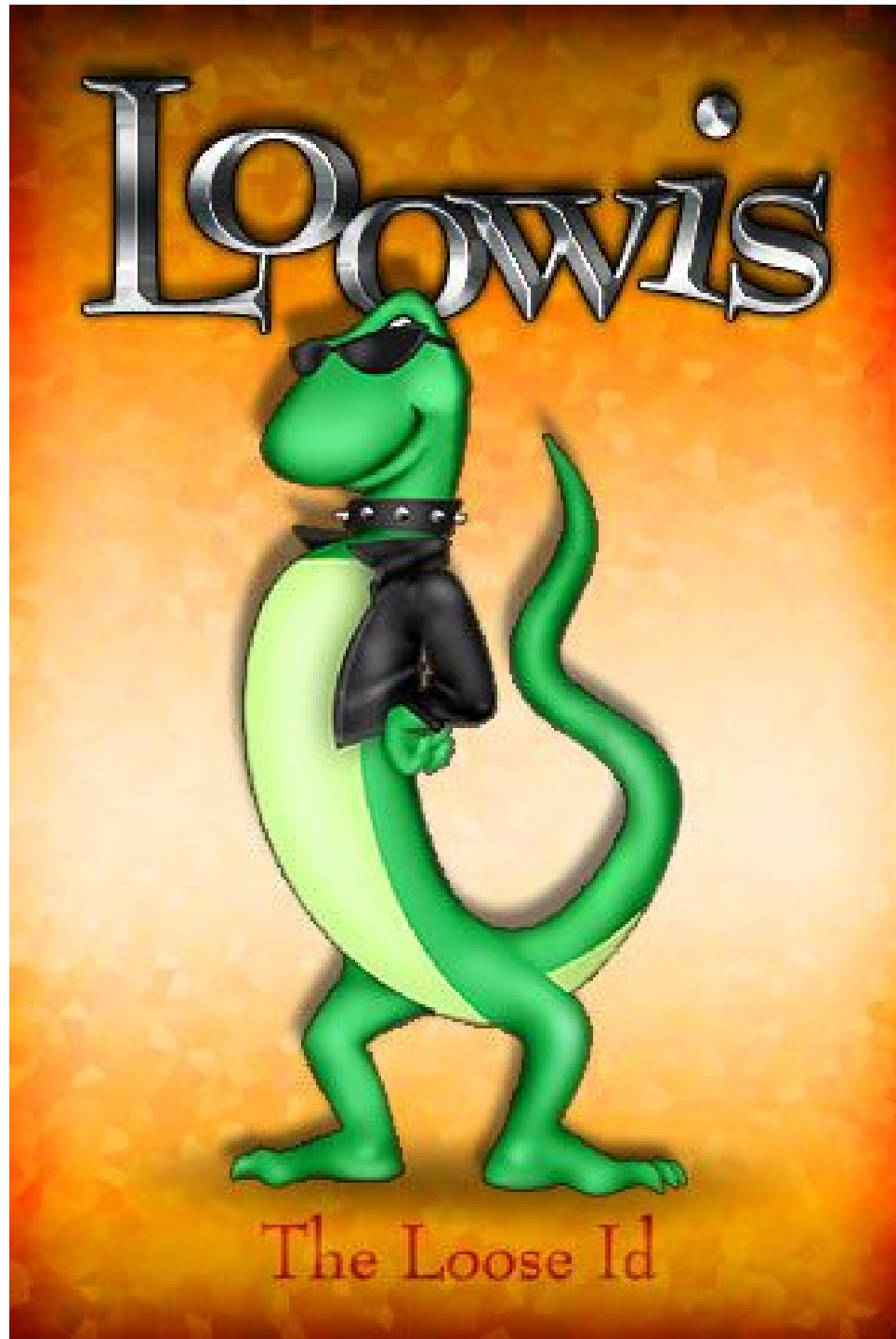
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Chapter One

London, June 1941

The skyline along the Thames was starting to flash with the same night-time firework display to which we had been treated for the best part of a week -- courtesy of Mr Hitler and his Luftwaffe. I reached the steps leading into the ministry still slightly breathless from running the last few hundred yards from the station. The warden at the entrance shook his head and waved me down, clearly distressed by my tardiness.

"You're going to get yourself blown up, luv," he fussed as I brushed past him into the semi-darkness of the interior. "Siren went twenty minutes ago."

"I've got an appointment," I panted in response. My racing heart felt as if it were sitting in my throat, not so much from the exercise but the thrill of the adventure upon which I was embarking.

The warden pointed into the building. "Take the steps down to the shelter. They'll be waiting for you."

His lips curved up in a knowing smile at his last remark, and I frowned a little, trying to decipher his meaning as I walked into the imposing, darkened foyer of the Ministry of

Defence. So many things had been strange about the last few days, ever since the major had walked into the lingerie department of Pride's Department store where I worked.

It had been a quiet Wednesday afternoon when Mary, my best friend at the store, dug an elbow into my ribs as I was diligently wrapping a bra and panties set for a customer, drawing my attention to the uniformed man who had just walked up the stairs. Customers had been a little scarce recently, what with everyone having to tighten their belts because of the war, and I couldn't remember the last time I had seen a lone male browsing in our department.

By my judgement he was probably about ten years older than myself, mid-thirties maybe, and well-built in a way that was accentuated by the good cut of his uniform. His blue eyes cast around the rows of ladies' intimates, showing not the slightest sign of embarrassment at entering a woman's domain as he rubbed the faint stubble on his chin thoughtfully.

"Bet he's shopping for his mistress," Mary hissed in my ear as I handed my customer her package.

"Mary!" I giggled in reproach. "You know we're not supposed to talk about the customers like that."

Mary tutted and shook her head. "You're such a prude, Agatha. You know that type all have one. A handsome devil like that in a Major's uniform probably has more than one slut on the side. Maybe he's looking for another..."

Without another word, Mary moved round the counter and started adjusting a rack of frilly knickers adjacent to where he was standing, bending slightly as she did so in an effort to catch his eye. Mary was a cute little brunette and a terrible flirt with any man she came into contact with. Her speciality was men in uniform, however, and there was no shortage of uniforms in London those days.

The Major cast his eyes slowly over Mary and the rack on which she was working. To my surprise, however, he carried on straight past her toward the counter. And me.

"I wonder if you could help," he said with a calm authority. He was no doubt used to giving commands.

Behind him Mary shrugged her shoulders and gave a suggestive wink that I chose to ignore.

"What kind of thing were you looking for, sir?" I asked, moving around the counter, sensing him cast his eyes up and down my body quickly as I did so -- a typical act of male appraisal that he did little to disguise. The blatantness of it made me blush a little when I met his eyes, a thrill of excitement coming out of nowhere. He held my gaze for a tantalising moment before looking away around the department.

"Do you have anything in lace or silk?"

I laughed quietly, and he raised his eyebrows.

"I'm sorry, sir," I said, "but there is a war on, you know. Those materials are in very short supply."

"It's not a question of money," he replied. "The Ministry of Defence will pay for the... best you have."

The government paying for lingerie? Just what was this? I had worked at Pride's long enough to never question a customer, however, and it was my pliable, willing-to-do-anything attitude with the customers that made me such a popular shopgirl. Nevertheless, I was bored with my life and there was something about this Major that was definitely out of the ordinary. The urge to probe him for more details was almost irresistible, but I merely led him over to a stand of my personal favourites.

"These are rather expensive," I said, running the delicate material of one of the panties between my fingers. "They're cotton but the trim and bow are lace. They're cut to be very... flattering to a woman. What size were you looking for?"

The Major thought for a moment and stepped back, looking me over once more. "About yours, I'd say. About your size exactly."

Again that unexpected thrill ran through me. Maybe it was the way he was appraising me, clearly imagining what the panties would look like on my body. Maybe it was the sudden realisation that I wanted him to see me in them. It was definitely turning into an interesting Wednesday afternoon!

I picked the bra and panties that would fit me perfectly. On impulse, I held them to my body so that he could get a clearer image in his mind, taking a quick look around to see that nobody was watching beforehand.

"Mmm," the major said appreciatively. "Those will do the job nicely."

Goodness knew what he meant by that!

"I'll also need stockings and suspenders."

We moved on through the racks, each time picking lingerie that I found attractive and would fit me. After ten minutes we had a pile of goods that amounted to more than two months' salary for a shopgirl like me. I had to confess that I had entered my role of adviser to the handsome military man above and beyond the line of duty. However, he had surprised me at one point. I had impulsively taken his hand in mine to place it on the lace of one of the suspender sets I was holding up and felt him recoil slightly, even as an excitement flashed in his eyes. It was as if he were simultaneously drawing something out of me and yet holding back. With a mutual apology and a smile we carried on with the tour of the department, finishing more quickly than I perhaps would have liked. *My goodness*, I thought to myself, *you're getting as bad as Mary!*

"Your help has been invaluable, miss ... ?" he asked as we finally made it back to the till.

"Agatha Blaine," I replied as I started wrapping his purchases.

“My name’s Major Jack Bentley.” He produced a card from his pocket and wrote something on the back before he handed it to me. The contact was the Ministry of Defence. I turned over the card to read what he had written.

8pm. Friday. Come to the rear entrance.

I looked at him a little coldly as I handed over the package. The matter-of-factness of the note had disappointed me after the promising half hour we had spent together. If he believed I was just going to ...

“It isn’t what you think, Miss Blaine,” he replied refusing to take back the card as I held it out. “Your country needs young women like you. More than you can know. Keep the appointment, please. Your talents are wasted here.”

With that he spun round briskly and marched out of the department. I turned the card over in my hand a couple of times, realising that I was breathing quickly, excited by the prospect of something unknown after so many months of the quiet life. Ever since my fiancé, Johnny, had joined up some two years previously life had been deathly dull. Now, I barely got out of my one-room flat in Soho. Worst of all, I hadn’t received a letter from Johnny in almost two months. I knew that he was safe, assigned to the code-breakers at Bletchley Park, but had he forgotten me? I felt alternatively weak and desperate, spending long nights of solitude in my little flat. And now Major Jack Bentley had arrived, promising excitement of some kind. The only question: was I willing to take it?

“My god!” Mary said breathlessly, appearing at my side and trying to snatch the card away from me. “He’s not wasting any time! He’ll have you spread in the back of his staff car before the weekend.”

“Mary!” I exclaimed, shocked. “Sometimes you really go too far.”

Yet two nights later I was keeping my appointment at the ministry.

A flight of marble steps led down to the basement area of the deserted building. The lights had been dimmed to their lowest level because of the blackout, and I had to feel my

way along, pressing into the darkness with the same rush of excitement that I had felt that afternoon in *Pride's*. Now, however, it came as much from the thrill of not knowing what lay ahead as much as the thought of seeing the handsome, commanding Major once more. The steps ended in a heavy oak door and I knocked twice.

"Come," a voice barked on the other side and I pushed open the door.

The windowless room on the other side was surprisingly large and ornately decorated, with oak-panelling on the walls, plush green carpet, and chandeliers linked up for electric lighting. At the other end of the room two men and a woman sat behind a long oak table, studying me as I stood in the doorway. I felt suddenly small and vulnerable in my little black dress and good shoes. The man sitting in the middle beckoned me forward, and I began the long walk across the room toward them.

I recognised Major Bentley, who was sitting on the left of the group. The man in the centre was middle-aged, red-faced (no doubt from too much alcohol consumption) and dressed in a uniform of higher rank. The third person was a woman only few years older than I, but strikingly attractive: her jet-black hair was as dark as her figure-hugging jacket and trousers -- unusual attire for a woman, yet still distinctly feminine on her. They all looked me over as I stopped a few feet from the table.

"Agatha Blaine?" The red-faced one spoke first, fussing with his moustache as he did so.

"Yes, sir." My voice sounded small in the silence of the room.

"My name's General Basingstoke and I run the show here at the ministry. Do you know why you've been asked here?"

"No, sir."

"You impressed the major here greatly, Blaine," he went on, nodding toward Bentley. "He thinks you've got what it takes to do some work for us. To do something important for your country."

Work? For the ministry? My heart raced, and I hardly knew what to make of the whole situation. If I had been expecting some kind of liaison with the major, things were taking an unusual turn.

"I don't know what to say, sir --"

"Don't say anything, Blaine!" General Basingstoke cut me short. "You haven't got the assignment yet! Bentley, tell her what to do."

The Major looked at me, sensing my confusion, and gave an encouraging smile that made me feel a lot better.

"Behind the screen you'll find some items, Miss Blaine," he said, nodding to the corner of the room. "We'd like you to go back there and put them on for us."

They offered no further instruction, so I turned and walked to the screen. Laid out on a little table on the other side was the first bra and panty set that I had picked out in the shop, along with a pair of stockings and black, shiny leather heels. I looked down at the items for a moment, speechless. Did they really expect me to get dressed up in the underwear and then walk out there again for their amusement? What kind of game was this? I was just about to turn and walk out of the room without a word when the woman's voice came unexpectedly from just the other side of the screen.

"I know what you're thinking, Miss Blaine," she said softly, her tone reassuring. "I thought the same thing when I was first invited here. But let me assure you everything that happens tonight is to help our war effort and you can play an important part in saving thousands of lives. Weigh that in your mind before you think about leaving."

I said nothing, my mind racing still, but came to a sudden decision after hearing the woman's words. For some reason I decided to trust her, to take the next step on this strange journey. I slipped out of my dress, conservative shoes and cheap underwear quickly. The lace-trimmed panties felt deliciously cool and smooth as I slipped them on. The stockings and heels came next. They were the kind of provocative attire that I would expect to see

Mary wearing on one of her flirting missions. The stockings felt illicit and tempting as I smoothed my hands over my legs and attached the suspender belt. When I finally slipped into the bra I was surprised to find myself excited by the act of dressing up and anticipating the audience waiting on the other side of the screen. What was happening? I was supposed to be the sensible shopgirl from *Pride's*. Fiancée of Johnny. What on earth was I doing?

Pushing such thoughts from my mind, I stepped around the screen and began to walk across the room toward the desk once again, the heels making my hips swing as I went. My audience watched speechlessly as I approached and stopped before them, brushing my blonde hair back from my shoulders as I did so. The General spluttered a little and his face went even redder. My nipples hardened even further and I felt a tingling between my thighs, sensing the appreciative gazes of both the woman and Major Jack over my body.

"Very good, Bentley," the man said thickly as he rose from his chair. "I like them with a little more meat on the bones, but she'll do the job. I've got to get back to the wife."

With that he rose and moved out of the room quickly, slightly bent as he walked. The woman leant forward, examining my legs and then up to my breasts. My heart beat even faster at the closer scrutiny.

"She's lovely," she said to the major as she rose also. "I can't wait to see her in action, but it would be more appropriate for you to finish the interview yourself."

As she left the room, Major Jack rose from his seat and walked around the table, his eyes never leaving me. I felt myself reddening under the power of his stare, which almost had a physical force in the room. As he approached I sensed him hesitate for a moment, almost as he had done when our hands had touched in *Pride's*.

"What is it?" I asked, trying to keep my voice even despite the natural quaver brought on by the racing of my heart.

"Standing there..." he began and then shook his head as if trying to clear an image from his mind. "You just reminded me of someone."

My mind raced. Who? Another agent? A lover? I needed to know more.

“I have some questions...”

The Major nodded, moving nearer and standing behind me, close enough to touch now, although he kept his arms stiffly at his sides as if deliberately holding himself back. He stood there for a moment, making no move. Just as I thought I could bear the tension no longer, I felt the tips of his fingers on me, tracing ever so lightly down my side and coming to rest at my hips. I trembled as if a jolt of electricity had been sent through my frame. I doubt that the sensation could have been greater had he pressed his entire body against me.

“I need to ask you to trust me, Miss Blaine,” he said quietly as I turned my head to meet his eyes. “I can train you, but without trust you can’t go to the places I need to take you ...”

Trust? I had met the man three days before, and this was only our second meeting, yet Bentley was asking me if I trusted him. The strangest thing was that everything in my mind and body sang out in unison that, in fact, I did. Maybe it was the deep blue of his eyes, maybe it was the softness I sensed behind the clipped military manner, but it was easy to answer in the affirmative.

“I trust you.”

“Will you do as I say?”

The question seemed to carry a significance that I could not fully comprehend at that moment, although I realised that my answer carried a terrible weight.

“I will... I will do as you say.” My goodness, I could hardly speak, my breath was so tight.

Bentley nodded and removed his hands from my side, straightening his tie in a reflexive movement that suggested some kind of task was about to begin. I found my breath quickening even further in anticipation.

“Get on the table,” he said again, his voice firmer now that he had my compliance. I felt a twinge of anxiety. *Get on the table*. Such a simple command, yet, to my mind, it had the feeling of a Rubicon about to be crossed.

Despite my reservations, I felt myself moving forward and placing my hands on the smooth surface of the table. I lifted myself on and shifted forward until I was on my hands and knees directly before the major. Looking down I could see my reflection in the highly-polished table-top, framed by the bra and panties, suddenly submissive on my hands and knees. Bentley moved to the edge of the table and ran a hand past my shoulders to cup one breast, his fingers finding the nipple beneath the cotton and testing its firmness. Once more, my whole body responded to his touch, an uncontrollable tremor starting at my legs and moving up through my hips. I let out a little gasp. How long was it since I had been touched like this? Not since that last night with Johnny.

As I met the major’s eyes I couldn’t resist biting my lower lip seductively, just as I had seen Mary do when she wanted a man, delighting at the excitement it generated in his eyes. It was as if something had taken me over, driving me on to perform for him in a way that I never would have considered before. The Major removed his hand from me and moved so that he was directly behind me. I followed him with my eyes, parting my legs only slightly so that he had a better view of my thighs and backside. All my second thoughts had disappeared. I desperately needed him to touch me again. What the major did instead shocked and surprised me – even tantalised me.

Removing the leather gloves that were stuck in his belt, Bentley swiped them swiftly across the left cheek of my behind. The sensation was sharp and painful, accompanied by the sound of a sharp slap that filled the room. I gasped and looked at him in surprise. But it wasn’t the slap that surprised me; it was the equally sharp eroticism that it provoked in me. I had to bite my tongue to stop from begging for another. The Major, however, mistook my expression for one of haughty indignation for he stepped back, disappointment flashing in his eyes. Or was there something else? A kind of relief?

“If you can’t take a little spanking, Miss Blaine, you’re no good for us. The people you’ll be dealing with will punish you in the most severe ways if you don’t give them exactly what they want.”

The thought set my mind and body racing again. The sensible Agatha would have left right there and then, climbed down from the table and fled back to Pride’s and her little flat. But that Agatha seemed to have taken a leave of absence that night. I bowed my head and clenched my buttocks tight against the material of the panties, signalling to the major that I wanted more.

I heard a sharp intake of breath and sensed only a moment’s hesitation before the major swiped the leather once more. This time he delivered it to the other cheek. A surge of excitement ran through my body from my thighs, the pain of the contact mixing with the racing pleasure at my groin. I wanted more from him.

With each strike I gasped a little louder as the skin became more tender. I looked at my reflection in the table-top once more and saw the timid shopgirl suddenly transformed into someone I had never seen before. I would have carried on asking him for more all night had he not thrown the gloves to the ground. I looked round at him and my hunger must have been easy to read, for he shook his head.

“That’s enough for tonight, Miss Blaine,” he said, softly now. “I want you to be able to sit down tomorrow.” His hands closed around my hips, pulling my taut buttocks toward his mouth, gentle now as he started to kiss the chastised flesh, softly at first but then with increasing eagerness as I moaned with pleasure. The sensation of his kisses against my tender, spanked skin made me groan and clutch the edge of the table tighter. Bentley’s tongue started to lick more hungrily against my flesh as he sensed my excitement rising to a peak. I felt his military composure begin to slip, but his arm wrapped around my waist to steady me when my climax drained the tension in my muscles and threatened to send me tumbling to the table’s surface.

“Whatever you do for the ministry, just remember you’re under me now, Miss Blaine.” His voice was firm, in command, but the caress of his fingers on my warmed skin was sweet and gentle. “You’ve showed us tonight that you can follow my orders without question. That may some day put you in the gravest danger; it might also some day save your life. Do you understand? From this day on, you follow my orders first and foremost.”

“Yes, sir,” I replied quietly. At this, his hands closed around my waist and I felt myself lifted from the table and placed on my feet before the major. He pulled off his jacket and placed it around my shoulders in an act of caring that surprised me. One hand stroked the side of my cheek briefly.

“You did well, Miss Blaine,” he said, and I felt a thrill at his approval. “My staff car will be waiting for you in the street to drive you back to your apartment. Now you’d better get dressed.” I looked down at the lingerie briefly and he obviously read my thought, for a smile crept across his lips. “You can keep what you’re wearing, and I’ll have the other purchases from Pride’s sent to you. I’ll have my jacket back, though.”

I smiled and walked back to the screen, aware of his eyes on my every step. Behind the screen I dressed quickly and returned the jacket to him -- but not before I had pressed it to my face quickly, taking in the intoxicating scent of his body that lingered there.

Chapter Two

The city bound platform of Monument station had been transformed for the night into an elongated dorm room as falling bombs rumbled overhead, the occasional impact close enough to dislodge tiles from the walls and send them clattering onto the silent tracks. The day had been hot and by eleven that evening the funk of a few hundred bodies made the atmosphere of the makeshift air-raid shelter almost unbearable.

Still, it was better than being above ground, I mused as I crouched in the shadows of the middle of the platform. All around, the smells and noises of the common folk of the city assaulted me as they snored and whispered together. Somewhere to my right the stifled moans of a couple having sex were barely audible in the darkness. I found myself straining to look in that direction. I turned away with a shake of my head. What did I hope to see?

I rose a little unsteadily on my feet and began to make my way to the eastern end of the corridor as Major Bentley had ordered, stepping over sleeping bodies carefully as I went.

Four days had passed since my interview at the ministry, during which time the major had been in contact only once. He had placed a call to Pride's, giving me a set of instructions in a curt, unemotional voice that betrayed nothing of what had happened between us at the ministry. It was almost as if the passion he had aroused in me meant nothing -- or was that

just part of the job to him? I could do little to disguise the excitement in my voice at hearing him again, but he was in control, holding back until I had carried out the mission. I desperately wanted to ask another private meeting of him, but suppressed the urge, knowing that there was a more important job in hand.

“Monument station at midnight,” he said, his voice direct and businesslike. “Go to the end of the platform and find the doorway there. You are to say that you are friend of Catherine Carlisle’s and ask for Klaus. He was her first contact in the group.”

“What am I to do there?” I asked, confused by the instructions.

“The room at Monument is the first point of contact into the organisation,” Bentley explained. “The people you meet will want to test you, but you’re more than capable of handling them at this stage. If you want to back out, now’s the time.”

The organisation. Major Jack explained it all to me briefly over the phone. One of their other agents, Catherine Carlisle, had been posing as an actress when she had been introduced to a member of a secret organisation that turned out to have links to the Nazi party. She had investigated further, getting close to several of the high-ranking members of the group and reporting back on their espionage activities. However, some eight months before, Catherine had disappeared suddenly.

Now I began to feel the true danger of the whole situation for the first time. The people I was going to meet were real spies working for the other side. One agent was already missing, perhaps dead. Yet instead of fear, I felt the same spike of excitement that I had during the interview. The promise of personal danger -- being in harm’s way -- held a new and unspeakable thrill that I felt powerless to resist.

“I’ll be there, Major,” I replied. “But when do I report back to you?”

There was a silence on the other end of the telephone for a second. “I’ll come to your flat the next evening to ... debrief you.”

*Is it my imagination or do I detect just the slightest hint of arousal in the major's voice?
Perhaps he's not so in control after all!*

The thought sent tiny electric shocks through my body. When he hung up the phone I was left with a sense of frustration that lingered on through the afternoon; it grew in the heat of the evening as I bathed and dressed myself in the provocative lingerie. Standing in my little flat I looked at myself in the bedroom mirror, running my hands from my hips up over my breasts, stroking myself there for a second. The temptation to satisfy myself was strong, and my mind filled with images of my last meeting with the major: kneeling for him while he chastised me with his gloves.

After all those months of waiting passively in the flat, I seemed on the verge of breaking out in a way that almost frightened me. I felt capable of anything and wondered how far I was willing to go to satisfy the strange new desires that grew stronger by the day. Yet what I desired more than anything was to see Bentley again. He was connected to this whole new experience in the most essential way. I was changing, growing, and it was to be under his tutelage. Yet so far, he had denied me. I closed my eyes and pictured his handsome jaw, my fingers creeping down between my own thighs as I did so. As I had found many times during the past few days, the very thought of Bentley had made me moisten in readiness for his touch.

In the end, however, I decided not to release the tension that had built to near breaking-point in me, saving it for the task I would have to perform that evening. There had been little information about what to expect when I reached the station, except to be ready for anything. It seemed they were leaving me deliberately unprepared. After four days without satisfaction from Bentley, I was certainly ready for something.

Just a few hours later I was waiting in the darkness of the station. My watch read twenty to twelve and I was going to be early, but I moved on relentlessly, drawn on by an invisible thread which seemed to pull me onward into the unknown. As I peered into the darkness of the tunnel, a shiver of anticipation ran through me, chilling my skin despite the

heat. Something told me that the adventure I sought waited for me right there. Yet the thought that really drove me on was the realisation that I would have to report everything to the major the next night. *Everything. Now, what would that involve?*

A figure brushed against me in the darkness and fingers closed around my upper arm, pulling me back from the edge of the platform and into the shadows at the side. I opened my mouth to cry out, but a hand clamped over my mouth, silencing my voice. Strong arms turned me round, and I found myself looking into a pair of eyes easy to identify even in the gloom.

“Major!” I whispered as he slowly withdrew his gloved hand. The same gloves he had used that night at the ministry, I realised with a little skip of the heart.

“Easy, Miss Blaine,” he said quietly but with urgency. “I need to speak to you before you take the final step tonight. Colonel Basingstoke wants you thrown in at the deep end as a test, but I’m not so bloody-minded when it comes to the lives of the people in my command. There are some things I want you to know first.”

I nodded, listening intently as he started to lay out the situation.

“The people you’re about to meet with are part of an organisation linked to the Nazi party. Their aim is to destabilize the government and society of this country, no doubt to make a future German invasion that much easier. They’ve tortured and terrorised every agent who has got close to them, but I’m hoping that someone less trained -- like you -- might be more easily accepted into their circle. They prey on innocents, forgive me for saying, and maybe they’ll be convinced that they can use you in some way. We already know that they have recruited several young men and women to use as... bait to lure some of our most prominent politicians into compromising situations. I couldn’t send you in there without briefing you on the true nature of these people and why I think they might be interested in you. Perhaps I’m putting you in harm’s way too soon...”

I studied his face, trying to read his thoughts. Was this another test, some way of finding out if I really had the right stuff to go ahead with the mission? Or was that real concern, real fear for my safety that I saw behind those steely eyes? Either way, I had come too far too fast to simply turn and walk out of Monument station that night, not least because such a decision would surely mean walking away from the major and the ministry forever.

I pulled myself up a little straighter and looked him hard in the eye. "I'm not backing out now, Major, so you may as well tell me what I need to know to get through tonight."

Bentley's eyebrows raised only fractionally and the flicker of admiration that I plainly saw for just a second made my heart beat faster. He reached inside his jacket and produced two photographs which he handed to me. The top picture showed a stunningly attractive blonde, not unlike Ingrid Bergman in appearance. I might have taken her for a movie star had I not noticed the name *Catherine Carlisle* written neatly at the bottom of the photograph.

So, this is the missing agent, I thought to myself.

Footsteps approached along the platform and Bentley grabbed my arms suddenly, pulling me toward him. Our lips met and he pressed me against the wall, obscuring our faces as a figure passed by, a swinging lamp illuminating our bodies momentarily. From the corner of my eye I saw the passing warden pause only briefly to catch an eyeful of the two lovers in the alcove before moving on. I surrendered to the kiss, moving my hand up to caress Bentley's neck as his lips ground against mine. Too quickly he pulled away, giving no indication that the contact had been anything more than a ploy to cover our identities. My knees felt weak.

"It's important that you can identify Catherine Carlisle," he said bluntly, bringing me back to reality as he plucked the photograph from my hand. My thoughts cleared as I remembered the mission and nodded my head to show that I was focused. Romantic notions about the major would have to wait, at least until I had safely made it through my first assignment.

"If she's being held in there or anywhere else we want her back," Bentley explained as he pocketed the picture once more. *We want her back. We or you, Major Bentley?* I'd begun to suspect that his interest in the stunning female agent was perhaps more than purely professional.

"She knows too much about our operations for them to be allowed to hold and interrogate her for too long," he explained, perhaps reading my thoughts. "As an experienced agent she was trained to stand up under extreme duress, but no one can hold out forever."

Extreme duress. I swallowed heavily as I had another intimation of just how serious the game was into which I was being initiated. I looked at the second photograph that he had given me. This one was slightly blurred, as if it had been taken quickly and secretly. It showed a grey-haired man in his late forties with a distinctive scar across his chin. He wore what appeared to be the uniform of an SS officer and a monocle in his right eye.

"That's Colonel Walter Kremp," the major explained. "That shot was taken in Berlin by one of our spies six months ago. Two weeks later that agent disappeared. We know that Hitler himself has assigned Kremp the job of managing the Nazi spies infiltrating the country. We even suspect that he has made visits in person into the country to recruit and train new spies. Count Rufus, we believe, is his right-hand man, and it's Rufus who is your target in this operation. He was the one who Catherine Carlisle got close to just before she disappeared. Make no mistake about it, these men are extremely dangerous."

I took a last look at the cold face of Colonel Kremp before handing the photograph back, his image etched on my memory. I had the strangest feeling that I was destined to cross paths with the man before too long and the prospect was chilling. Bentley's hand closed over my arm, giving it a squeeze that filled me with strength once more.

"It's time," he said, nodding toward the end of the platform. I looked round, suddenly wishing that I could stay there in the shadows with him indefinitely. But I had a job to do and I was determined to prove myself worthy of Bentley's trust. I nodded and made to move away, surprised when the major laid a hand on my shoulder.

“Good luck, Miss Blaine,” he said quietly as he slipped back into the shadows. I made a move to say something but found myself standing alone once more; he had disappeared into the darkness like a phantom. Steeling myself, I walked as quietly as possible among the sleeping bodies.

I stepped onto the narrow ledge that ran along the inside of the tunnel and edged along the curved wall, feeling in the darkness for any kind of doorway or handle. After a minute of fumbling along, I found it: a heavy iron latch that I struggled with before managing to force it up. A door opened and I almost fell into the room beyond.

A single bulb dangled from the ceiling in the centre of the space, throwing out a meagre circle of light in the middle, leaving the walls in total darkness, and making it impossible to see how large the space actually was. If anything, it was more oppressively hot here than on the platform.

“Who goes there? Step into the light,” a voice ordered from the darkness, the accent German, maybe.

I obeyed without a word, surrendering to the situation without question now. I had come too far for second thoughts and was possessed of a new determination. Yet in the middle of the room I felt suddenly vulnerable once more, as if the darkness encircling me was scrutinising, watching with many eyes.

“I’m a friend of Catherine Carlisle’s...” I began.

A cruel laugh cut me short. “Catherine Carlisle doesn’t have any friends. Not anymore. Put up your arms.”

“I beg your pardon ...”

“Arms out to your side. I want to see you’re not armed. Do it.”

So, this was it. *Dammit, Blaine*, I told myself, imagining Major Jack’s voice in my head, *if you weren’t prepared to put yourself on the line, you should have stayed home!* The

thought of his voice, even chastising, gave me strength and I held my arms out, trying to disguise the slight tremble in them.

“Very good. Stand still.”

Behind me someone drew a bolt across the door and footsteps approached out of the darkness.

“I was told to ask for Klaus,” I said, not looking round.

A hand touched my shoulder, and I flinched as a fingertip traced down my spine. I was aware that my face glistened with sweat although I shivered a little, as much from the anticipation of the unknown as anything else.

“Don’t move and you won’t be hurt.” The voice came from the darkness again, not from the person standing behind me. How many more were there in the shadows? Fingers brushed over my blouse, delicately feeling down the side of my body and my skirt. They moved round and patted over my stomach, coming up to brush my breasts quickly before moving away.

“She’s clean,” a similarly accented voice said from directly behind me, the voice hoarse with barely contained excitement. Footsteps moved round me and I saw him for the first time. Muscle-bound, naked from the waist up and over six feet tall, he was sweating as much as I was, tattooed skin shining in the light. He ran his free hand over his shaven head, brushing away beads of moisture that clung there. What did they mean to do with me? The urge to bolt from the room was almost overpowering, but I held my feet firmly in place.

“Bring her in.” The first voice again, still cool and unemotional.

The giant took my upper arm in his meaty fist and led me forward into the darkness and through a door. In another room a single, metal chair sat beneath a naked bulb. My arm was released and I was pushed toward the seat. The metal felt cool through the back of my blouse and my skin prickled uncomfortably. Without warning a brilliant light shone directly in my face, and I had to raise my hand to my eyes.

“Who are you?” The same voice from the other room, seemingly at the centre of the light, but even more interrogative and demanding now.

“My name’s Agatha Blaine,” I replied, lowering my hand a little as my eyes became accustomed to the blinding light. My real name simply slipped out. I hadn’t even considered an alias, although I realised that was probably what real spies used. Too late! “I’m a friend of Catherine Carlisle.”

“How did you know her?” the voice snapped.

“We met at a party...”

“Whose party?”

“A friend’s.”

“Which friend?”

“I ... I can’t remember...”

“But I thought you said it was a friend.”

“It was, but...”

The disorientating light seemed to bore into my brain, stopping all thought. Then I imagined Bentley’s voice coming from the darkness, giving me strength. I took a deep breath and met the light, feeling a strange composure come over me suddenly.

“We met at Pride’s,” I said finally.

“Pride’s --” the voice began, but I cut it short.

“In the lingerie department where I worked for a while. You know, paying the bills. Catherine shopped there from time to time. We got talking over a suspender set and she invited me to a little gathering. I can’t remember the name of the host.”

The voice fell silent for a moment. I couldn’t repress a smile at the little victory, getting the feeling that my answer had passed some kind of muster. To my surprise I saw a figure moving forward in the darkness, circling the chair and examining me, but keeping to the

shadows. The hot tip of a cigarette glowed and smoke wafted across the beam of light before me.

“And Catherine told you all about where to find us? I find that a little hard to believe. She was nothing if not ... discreet.”

“We shared many similar interests. She thought that I might appreciate membership of your organisation. She wanted to bring me here herself, but she left the city suddenly, so I forgot completely about it. I really just came to see if anyone knew where I might find her ...”

I heard the sucking sound of the cigarette being drawn upon in the darkness behind me. “That sounds like ... what is the English word? Bullshit, my dear. Now, why don’t you tell us all why you’re really here?”

“I’m telling you the truth,” I hissed, aware of movement in the room but not looking round. “I just want to know where my friend is.”

“But finding Catherine Carlisle could be dangerous for one’s health.”

A pair of hands clamped onto my shoulders, holding me down in the chair as a short, suited figure approached from the darkness. He held up the half-smoked cigarette dangling in his hand for me to see and then brought the burning tip close to my face -- and then toward my right eye. I flinched away reflexively, but the giant’s hand came up to cup the back of my head, pulling it round. My vision began to swim as the red point of the cigarette blurred like the sun before my iris.

“What’s your name?”

“Agatha... Agatha Blaine.”

“Where did you meet Catherine Carlisle?”

“At a... At Pride’s lingerie department...”

“Why are you really here?” The burning red circle seemed to increase in size, and I was certain that I could feel my eyelashes singeing.

“My friend ... Catherine...”

“Tell me what she looks like.”

Again the questions went round and round, tripping me over and spinning my mind. After a minute of questioning I was sure that I was about to break down and beg him to stop. Then, in a flash, my interrogator removed the glowing point of the cigarette from my vision, and the giant released my head. Through my watering eyes I saw the little man drop the cigarette on the floor and grind it out with his shoe. He looked back at me with a hawk-like expression as I rubbed my hand over my eye, relieved that it was unharmed.

“Well done, Miss Blaine. If you really want to find Catherine Carlisle, be at this address three days from now. 8 pm. Don’t be late.” He reached into his jacket and produced a card, which he held before me and then dropped into my lap. I picked it up, relieved to see that my hand did not shake as I took it. I glanced down at the card and saw an address printed there: *Flat 6, 23 Poker Street.*

“You must meet Estella first. She controls access to the count and the estate. Wait here for two minutes and then leave the way you came in. Never come here again. You will find this place deserted.”

With that, he disappeared into the shadows and a second later the light shining in my face was extinguished. I sat stock still on the chair, looking down at my watch as the little second hand ticked round. Two minutes. My body began to shake uncontrollably as I sat beneath the cold light of the bulb; I realised that I was going into mild shock after the experience. Nothing I imagined could have had prepared me for the ordeal with the cigarette -- and yet I had survived. That very thought calmed my shattered nerves as I watched the second hand complete another circuit around the watch face. I rose only a little unsteadily, clutching my prize -- the card with the address -- in my fist as I walked as evenly as possible back out into the station.

There was no sign of Bentley on the platform as I emerged, and the alcove where we had stood before was empty. Desperate as I was to search for him after my ordeal, I knew that the men from the room were no doubt watching my exit and moved as quickly as possible to the stairs leading up.

The all-clear siren had not yet sounded, but I slipped easily past the dozing warden at the entrance and out onto the eerily deserted street. The night air was cool now, drying my skin and providing relief from the heat of the last thirty minutes.

The experience had raised as many questions as it had answered. Clearly the secret room in the station was the point of entry to the underworld with which Catherine Carlisle had flirted. But were they really Nazis? Now all I could do was wait for Wednesday and my meeting with the mysterious Estella. But first I had to report properly to the major -- a thought that sent a thrill right to my very core.

Chapter Three

A brisk series of knocks on my apartment door signalled the arrival of Bentley at eight the following evening.

I had rushed home from work where I had been distracted all day, making several mistakes with customers' change to the point where my supervisor, Mrs Childs, had called me into her office to ask if anything was wrong. I made up an excuse about missing Johnny, not revealing my true preoccupations: the interrogation of the night before and my meeting with Major Jack Bentley that evening. The mention of Johnny gave me a pang of guilt as I thought of my promises to him. If only I could call him, but such contact was impossible because of the secret nature of his code-breaking work. I reminded myself that I had broken my vows to him for England and felt immediately better. Nevertheless, I couldn't pretend that my feelings didn't go well beyond the line of duty.

I had bathed quickly and dressed in one of the remaining sets of underwear from Pride's, wanting to be ready for Bentley's arrival. I found myself moving quickly to the door when he knocked and almost laughed at my own eagerness. I was behaving for all the world like a smitten schoolgirl! I threw open the door to find him standing in the hallway, looking as good as ever in his uniform. A mere week before I would have no doubt worried what the

neighbours might think if they saw me inviting a man into my apartment, but I was fast getting past such prudish notions. It frightened me a little.

“Miss Blaine,” the major said briskly as he moved past me into the flat, casting an eye around the interior. I felt suddenly embarrassed by its simplicity and wondered if it looked desperately humble to a successful officer in the MoD. If it did, he hid it well, for he smiled approvingly.

“Pull over one of the chairs and sit in front of me,” he ordered, motioning to one of the kitchen chairs at my small dining table as he took a seat on my sofa. This surprised me a little, but I complied, placing the chair a few feet in front of him and sitting down primly. *What had I been expecting anyway? Perhaps the interview was just business, after all,* I thought with a sinking heart. The Major certainly seemed all business now that I had been initiated into the covert world in which he operated.

“Tell me about your meeting at Monument.” He had withdrawn a small black notebook from his pocket and was holding a pencil poised to take down my statement. I coughed and shifted my position on the seat, suddenly uncomfortable. Was this all there was to be to our meeting: the chance for him to coldly note down the details of all I had put myself through the night before? My heart sank a little.

“Come on, Miss Blaine,” he prompted. “This is no time to be shy. Believe me, I’ve heard it all before and everything you tell me will be in the strictest confidence.”

Nodding my head, I launched into a description of the room at the station and the two men who had been waiting there. I tried at first to keep my observations purely about the men, what they looked like, how they spoke and so on. However, to my surprise, Bentley started to press for details about my feelings, my reactions to my experience.

“And how did that feel?” he probed, much as a detective might question a suspect, as I related how I had been searched.

“It was frightening to think they thought I had a weapon,” I replied. “But I remembered that I had a job to do.”

Bentley nodded intently at this, his pencil scribbling across the page of his notebook.

“They were in control and I wondered that they might make me... submit to them both,” I added as Bentley motioned for me to continue. “Sexually, I mean.” I sensed that I was reddening.

“And how did that thought make you feel, Miss Blaine?” *What a question!* “Did you find it an uncomfortable experience?”

I thought about that for a moment. “I wouldn’t say I was willing to submit to those men. I mean, they’re on the other side, aren’t they?”

“Mmmmm, I understand. Good answer, Miss Blaine.” The Major’s pencil went into overtime on the page. “Go on ...”

I described the first series of questions to which I had been subjected.

“Did they tell give you any indication as to whether Carlisle is dead or alive?”

I shook my head slowly. “I’m sorry, Major. No.”

The Major’s pencil stopped abruptly on the page and his eyes met mine, suddenly full of a desperate, needful pain. It was in that moment I realised that his feelings for Catherine Carlisle went far beyond the professional and I felt the first pang of an insane jealousy. I couldn’t restrain myself from asking the question.

“You were in love with her?”

The Major breathed a little quicker at this, moving forward from the sofa and standing over me, the notebook falling from his hand.

“I’ll ask the questions, Miss Blaine,” he said as he circled me, a hand brushing the nape of my neck as I continued to describe Klaus’s interrogation of me at the point of a cigarette. Bentley’s grip on my throat suddenly became firm, pulling my head back and lifting me from the chair. My voice trailed away as I felt suddenly in his power again, completely unable to

resist. Hands lifted my dress at the back, running over the material of my panties as he brought his mouth down to my neck hungrily. *My God*, I thought as his teeth dug into my skin, *he's going to devour me like a wolf*.

I let out a little involuntary cry of excitement and he spun me round, pulling the dress from my shoulders. Bentley's eyes flicked over my semi-naked form, searching and racing as if weighing up what he wanted to do to me first. My gaze glanced down to the chair beside us and he seemed to take some kind of inspiration from that, turning me and placing a hand on my back to bend me forward. I gripped the back of the chair and closed my eyes in anticipation of what was to come: the leather of his gloves hard against the skin of my backside, the kisses on tender flesh and finally surrendering completely to my major.

Instead, to my great surprise, I heard Bentley step back, denying me what I expected. I turned to him questioningly, but knew that it was best to say nothing as he looked me up and down.

"How you handled the interrogation was most impressive, Miss Blaine," he said evenly. "You didn't fold under a little duress and it's very hard to find a female agent who can stand up to them. All they understand is strength and force. Don't be fooled, though. Klaus was just a low-level member of the organisation, easy to master. To stand up against the count and his sister you'll need to be truly dominant. I can teach you that, but first you have to learn to submit. Learn what it's like to be controlled so you can control yourself."

He moved around me, fingertips stroking my shoulder as he circled.

"Do you think you can do that? Submit to me?"

"Yes, Major. But I thought I already had."

Bentley gave a short laugh and shook his head, standing behind me and placing his hands on my shoulders. "That was just a little light spanking, Blaine. Hardly what I'd call submission."

"I want to learn ..." I was aware that my voice sounded strained and breathless with excitement, almost as if it were coming from someone else. The major nodded and walked to the kitchen chair, picking it up by the back like it was a feather and examining it. With a swift motion he smashed his fist up, dislodging the cushioned seat and leaving a hole in the frame where one would sit. He placed the chair firmly down on the floor before me and motioned for me to sit.

"But..."

"Do it, Miss Blaine," he ordered, no longer willing to discuss matters. I sat daintily on the edges of the frame, my backside feeling exposed against the hole that the major had created in the underside of the seat. Bentley nodded approvingly and reached into his jacket, slowly drawing out a silk scarf that he played through his hands in front of my face.

"Put your hands round the back of the chair," he ordered and I complied immediately, tantalised to find out where all this was going. Bentley moved round and bound my wrists together with the scarf efficiently.

"Not too tight," he whispered in my ear, "but you're not going anywhere."

Breathing quickly now, I allowed him to tie my ankles to the front legs of the chair. Bentley paused, regarding me with satisfaction as he looked over my spread legs and exposed thighs. No doubt it was all too easy for him to see how aroused I had become at his treatment. My body cried out for his touch, yet I held my tongue, knowing that it was not permitted to ask. I merely looked at him, wide-eyed with a desperate need.

Yet, rather than coming to me, Bentley turned and cast his eye around the room.

"You keep a tidy house, Miss Blaine," he said, moving to the chest of drawers and picking up the framed photograph there. The one of Johnny. I cursed inwardly at not having put it away somewhere. Bentley, however, picked it up and examined the attractive young man in the picture. "A fiancé?"

I thought for a moment before shaking my head, coming to a sudden realisation. “No. Not any more, I think. It’s so difficult to stay close these days ...”

My voice trailed away, lost for words, yet Bentley was nodding in complete understanding.

“This war,” he said quietly as he replaced the frame, face down. “It’s a wonder anybody has love anymore.”

I shifted in my seat, the open hole under me making my position increasingly uncomfortable. I tensed my muscles and strained a little against the silken bonds, but Bentley seemed to show little regard for my discomfort or the fact that I was sitting there waiting for him as he began to walk around my apartment, assessing it calmly.

“Sit still, Miss Blaine,” he ordered as he picked a book from the shelf and leafed through it. I nodded, trying my best as my legs began to tremble uncontrollably. Finally, he turned back to me, replacing the book on the shelf. “Have I made you uncomfortable?”

I looked at him, but refused to nod my head, realising that this would stop our session. Bentley walked around me in slow circles.

“Just say *Odessa* and I’ll set you free,” he said, bending close to me as he circled. “Say the word at any time and I stop. Standard operating procedure in the service. *Odessa*. Say it and I let you go.”

I looked down, aware that beads of sweat had started to form across my breast and were slowly trickling down my skin and across the lace surface of the lingerie. Bentley’s fingers traced across my shoulder blades, feeling the tension and the heat there. They moved down and unclipped the hook of my brassiere, allowing my breasts to fall free from the lace. Those hands moved round to palm and thumb my expectant nipples, already erect and sensitive in contrast to the aching tension spreading up my legs. I heard myself gasp and bit my lip to stop from crying out.

“Say *Odessa*,” Bentley said again, challenging me to continue. I raised my chin, determined to hold out further. I wanted more and shook my head as he gave my nipples one final tweak.

He walked around to face me again. “I’m impressed, Miss Blaine. But I don’t think you’ll hold out much longer. You do realise that I could leave you there all night if I wanted to ...”

The major had me powerless and in a state of constant expectation. My whole body quickened in response. He hooked his hands under the material around my left thigh and snapped it with ease, bringing a tremor up my legs that increased when he snapped the other side and pulled the panties from me. Now I was truly exposed as he knelt before me, scrutinising my secrets, leaving me breathless.

He twisted the torn material of the panties in his hands and snapped it through the air at the underside of the seat. The silk nipped at my exposed buttocks, and I let out a cry of pain-tinged excitement. He had increased the sensation with my own powerlessness and rising expectation. Bentley’s free hand worked its way up my leg and found my sex, parting my moistened lips easily. My engorged flesh was only too ready for his touch. The material snapped across my backside like a whip once more as he started to run his fingers up and down my most sensitive area, the sudden conflict of sensation driving my pleasure to a peak that made me cry out.

Bentley’s fingers found their way inside me while the heel of his palm rubbed against my swollen labia and clitoris. Inside, I gripped his fingers firmly. When he felt my response, his eyes rose to meet mine, and he snapped the torn lace across my backside once more. White light exploded behind my eyes as I came against his hand, gasping and crying with pleasure as I reached a peak that I had never experienced before.

“Odessa,” I gasped, slumping against my bonds. “Oh, God, Odessa.”

Bentley moved swiftly, untying my ankles and then hands. He lifted my body from the chair and carried me to the sofa, laying me down gently on the cushions. I wrapped my arms around him, desiring only to be held.

“Good show, Miss Blaine,” the major said softly as I nuzzled against his neck. His hands played over my strained muscles, soothing and caressing where there had been discomfort. I arched up, desperate for contact with him and our lips met in a kiss that was softer and more delicate than the one we had shared at Monument -- yet infinitely more dangerous it would seem, for the major pulled away after only a few seconds.

“No,” he said firmly. “I can’t give you that.”

I pulled him back toward me, demanding more and realised that I had made a mistake as he rose from his position beside me. His eyes searched the room, coming to rest on a blanket sitting freshly laundered in the basket. Fetching it, he placed it over my naked form and ran a hand through my hair.

“I can train you, Miss Blaine,” he said finally. “But that’s all.”

With that he rose. I fully expected him to disappear once more, much as he had at Monument when he had slipped into the shadows. Yet, to my great surprise, he moved to the kitchen where he busied himself preparing a warm pot of tea that he served to me as I lay on the sofa, safe in the blanket he had wrapped around me.

* * * * *

“The major blames himself for the disappearance of Catherine Carlisle, you see. They were lovers, but more than that.”

It was the next day and I was sitting in the office of the woman who had been present in the interview room when I had visited the ministry for my first formal training session. I had learnt that her name was Lady Hester Richmond. She was in charge of the training of female operatives recruited by the ministry.

I sipped at the tea she had made for me in the delicate and expensive china cup, frowning slightly.

"I'm not sure I understand what you mean, Lady Richmond," I said. "More than lovers?"

The other woman smiled and poured herself another cup as she sat on the other side of the desk from me in her large, airy office.

"Major Bentley is one of our best talent-spotters when it comes to new female agents," Lady Richmond explained. "He picked you out and he discovered Catherine Carlisle as well. They shared an interest in ... how can I say it? Corporal punishment. Perhaps you experienced this side of his character during your interview?"

I put down my cup and saucer on the desk, realising that my face had reddened. The other woman nodded in understanding.

"Miss Carlisle was our best operative, mainly because she was willing to submit totally to the directions of the major in all areas. I had the privilege of seeing their love-making once during a training session, and I must say that I envied their relationship. Such divine discipline was inflicted, yet a discipline that elevated them both. I regret I have never found any man or woman worthy of such submission."

I looked at Lady Richmond carefully at this last remark, sensing the sadness in her voice, trying to imagine what she had observed. And just what kind of training sessions did the ministry run anyway?

"You remind me of her," she continued, smiling at me. "And I'll wager you remind him of her too. He sent her to that last meeting even though she didn't want to go. Catherine was getting in too deep with the Nazis and they scared her, believe me. He ordered her to collect more information before we went in to arrest them."

"But she disappeared before you could do that," I said.

"That's right. Along with a lot of the information she had on the spies. Of course, all Bentley cared about was Catherine. And now you're here, doing the same thing she did..."

I bit my lip, thinking over the whole thing for a moment.

"May I speak frankly, Lady Richmond?"

She sat back in her chair and steepled her fingers. "I'd be disappointed if you didn't, Miss Blaine."

"Last night the major came to my apartment and I so wanted him to ... dominate me."

Lady Richmond raised an eyebrow and sat forward, eager to hear more. "Well, it seems that you have more than a little in common with Catherine Carlisle, but the prospect of mastering you fully as he did her is probably too much for him to bear. Give him time, though, if it's love you seek. If I know Major Jack Bentley, he won't be able to suppress his natural urges for long and nor should he. Be patient with him."

I nodded, understanding now. However, I felt as if I was part of something greater than just Major Jack and me. My passion for him and the need for more of what he had given me that first night was tangible, but we both had a job to do. Lady Richmond saw the turmoil I was going through, but also my resolve. She smiled.

"I can tell that you're going to be a good agent for us, Blaine," she said, moving around the table and beckoning me to stand also. "Now it's time for your standard training to begin. We sent you on your first mission completely unprepared to see how you'd perform and I must say you'd impressed us all. A naïve and untrained operative can often get a lot further than someone over-schooled in espionage. But next time you should go in with a few more techniques and tricks. You did amazingly well, and Bentley knows it too."

"But they got my name, where I work," I confessed. "I practically spilled the beans on everything they asked me."

Lady Richmond laid a reassuring hand on my arm as she led me across the room. "I'm afraid that they probably would have found out all that information without your help, Miss

Blaine. They're that good. But don't worry about the information you gave them. They're not interested in attacking you, but drawing you in deeper. It's what they do. That's why they want you to go to them."

I swallowed heavily, but nodded in acceptance, knowing that this was just part of the job I had signed on to do. If I had wanted to be a shopgirl all my life, I would have never kept the first appointment at the ministry. We had stopped in front of a bare section of oak-panelled wall, but Lady Richmond pressed a hidden lever and a section slid away revealing a secret area beyond. She motioned me into the room and I stepped through the door, my eyes widening at what I saw within: racks of underwear of the most delicate and expensive-looking silk and lace; shelves of high-heeled shoes of all sizes and colours; display cabinets with instruments of punishment such as canes and whips laid out; shelves of books with titles that suggested they were either erotic fiction or manuals designed to improve one's love-making; and, confusingly, some items that were a complete mystery: balls and rings, tiny glass vials, nooses and pieces of strange-looking electronic equipment.

"Welcome to the storeroom," she said, casting an arm around.

"You put Pride's lingerie department to shame, Lady Richmond," I said, which elicited a laugh from her.

Several hours later I was still tingling from my training session.

Chapter Four

We made it to the address fifteen minutes early. The last light of the day was fading and the first air-raid warning siren of the night was sounding in the distance. The streets here, some of the poorest in the city, were practically deserted as most people had already retired to the safety of their shelters for the night. The building I was headed for stood alone amidst the rubble of a block flattened by the nightly barrage. Amazingly, number 23 had escaped destruction thus far. I hoped that its luck held out tonight.

Bentley and I were standing in the shadows of an alleyway directly opposite. He surprised me by looping his arm through mine and holding me close as we observed the scene. Once again playing the lovers as cover, I realised with a little flutter of disappointment.

"I went to see Lady Richmond," I said quietly, wishing that I could reach up and kiss him.

"Then you know about Catherine Carlisle and me ..."

"Yes."

He looked down at me, and I saw the pain in his eyes once more. "Please understand, I mixed love and the mission once before, and it ended badly."

"I'm not her, Major," I said softly. "I don't need protecting, so much as ..."

He raised an eyebrow as I struggled for words and we both ended up laughing, some of the tension between us released. A light came on in one of the third-floor windows and Bentley stiffened against me. He reached into his jacket and produced a pistol, opening the chamber and checking the shells before snapping it closed.

"I'm coming with you this time, Miss Blaine," he said, but I placed a restraining hand on his arm.

"If you go up there, they'll run and we won't learn a thing. I can handle myself. Just knowing you're out here makes me strong."

Bentley studied me for a moment before replacing the gun in its holster. "Call and I'll come running. Do you hear?"

I nodded and gave his hand a final squeeze before setting off across the deserted street. It was all I could do to stop myself looking back as I approached the building, suddenly desperate to see his face just once more. But to do so would have given away his position, so I resisted. Once inside the front door, I took the staircase up to the third floor, running my hand over the peeling paint of the banister as I went. An acrid urine smell hung faintly in the air. The building had been deserted by its residents some time before, no doubt condemned after the general devastation of the neighbouring buildings. I hoped that it was still structurally sound as I walked onto the third-floor landing toward, floorboards creaking alarmingly underfoot.

The flat was basically a one-room affair with a dirty kitchen in one corner and a door that presumably led to bathroom in another. Moth-eaten blackout curtains hung over the windows. A standard lamp situated next to a leather chair in the centre of the floor provided the only light in the room. They were the only pieces of furniture, save for a cheap straight-backed wooden chair.

In the leather chair sat a woman not much older than I and certainly no more than thirty. She was covered from neck to foot by a black leather trench coat so it was impossible to tell much about her figure. Her face, though, was strikingly beautiful. Close-cropped black hair gave her a slightly androgynous appearance that I could not help but find attractive. Clearly, this was Estella, the woman who controlled access to the count. She beckoned me forward with one hand, looking me up and down with predatory eyes as I approached.

The door closed behind me and I turned to see an oversized man standing there, blocking any exit. The features of his face were hidden in shadows, but the body was unmistakably that of the muscle-bound man who had searched me at Monument. He folded his arms and leant against the wall, looking past me for commands from the woman. Klaus, my interrogator from Monument, appeared in the bathroom doorway, an angry blue bruise forming on his cheek. His bottom lip was split.

“Recognise some old friends?” the woman in the chair asked in unexpectedly aristocratic tones. Definitely English, unlike her underlings.

I gave no response, keeping my eyes on her. She gestured for me to take a seat in the spartan chair opposite her, which I did.

“I was impressed to hear about your performance in the station,” she continued with a half smile, slowly beginning to unbutton the trench coat from the top down, “and, as you can see, Klaus has been punished for his weakness. He should have questioned you... more thoroughly.” In the doorway, Klaus touched a finger to his broken lip reflexively, keeping his eyes low.

Estella stood and allowed the coat to fall from her shoulders revealing porcelain white skin framed in black lingerie, a corset and stockings. It was impossible not to admire the firmness of her figure and the fine curves of her breasts and hips. She smiled at the effect her appearance had on me as my eyes widened, no doubt a common response to her provocative beauty. However, it was something on her left hip which caught my eye: an intricate tattoo

depicting a snake coiling around a many armed object. A swastika. My jaw opened a little in disbelief at the sight.

“Yet seeing you before me in the flesh, I wonder if my assessment was correct,” Estella continued, beginning to walk around me, heels clicking against the floorboards. “I wonder how easy it would be to master you ...”

Her hand brushed my hair, gentle and yet suffused with danger. It was all I could do to stop from leaping from the chair, but I remembered my training with the major and controlled my natural urge to flee, giving Estella her moment of power. She moved round, a single nail tracing the softness of my jaw, her breathing coming quicker as I met and held her icy, black gaze.

“My goodness, you are quite fearless, aren’t you? What’s your name?”

“Agatha Blaine. And yours?”

“I am Estella von Friedrich,” she answered, turning away from me abruptly and walking to a table where she uncapped a bottle of scotch and poured herself a generous double. “Drink, Miss Blaine?”

“I don’t.”

“Hmm, aren’t you a good girl.” This was said with an archly mocking tone as she leant back, studying me once more. “Did you really know Catherine Carlisle well? She always struck me as a woman who would find making female friends rather difficult, and I should know.”

I shrugged slightly and gave her the merest smile, as if I were making a small confession. “Well, we met a couple of times. Mostly at parties. She told me about a private club she was going to ... under Monument station. I was intrigued and decided to follow up on it.”

Estella let out a short laugh and drained her glass, immediately pouring another. “Interesting story. I wonder if you really have what it takes to go any further.”

"I want to go to the estate I've heard so much about. And I want you to arrange a meeting with the count for me."

"My goodness, you do speak your mind, don't you?" she said, putting down her drink and picking something else up from the table, which she held behind her back as she approached me once more. "But I just don't believe you, Miss Blaine. I can see fear in the back of your eyes. So don't try to give me orders until you're really in control of yourself. Jorgen!"

The muscle-bound one moved surprisingly quickly, grabbing my arms and pinning them behind me. I struggled as some kind of rope was lashed roughly around my wrists. It was impossible not to think of Major Bentley and his silk scarf: how enjoyable that captivity had been! Estella stood over me now, revealing the object that she had picked up. It was a metal syringe, filled with an evil-looking yellow liquid. She reached forward and stroked my skin, identifying an area of bare flesh ready for the two-inch needle to penetrate.

"I'd ask you to tell me the truth, Miss Blaine," she said, squirting a jet of the liquid through the air to clear the chamber of oxygen bubbles, "but this serum has much more reliable results. After two minutes with this in your veins, you'll do whatever I want."

I did my best to keep my composure, but realised that sweat was breaking out on my forehead. Even if I could delay the inevitable, even if I called out and he heard me all the way across the street, the major would never make it up the stairs in time. Estella bent close to me, but to my surprise the point of the needle did not follow. Instead, her lips brushed mine lightly and then pulled away, her dark eyes full of excitement from having me at her mercy. Breathing heavily, I pulled myself more erect in the chair, unwilling to let her see me rattled.

"Don't touch me," I said evenly. Estella smiled as she advanced again, this time with the syringe poised.

"Don't be afraid, my dear. It's just a little prick..."

I let out a gasp of pain as the cold metal pierced my skin. Estella made to depress the plunger as a high-pitched whistle filled the air. My captor froze and looked to the ceiling, following my gaze. To any person who had lived through the gruelling months of the blitz, the sound was unmistakably that of a falling bomb.

“Scheiße!” screamed Jurgen from the doorway as he fumbled desperately with the handle. Less than a second later the back wall of the room exploded, throwing bricks and rubble into the room as part of the floor fell away. I flew forward and landed hard on my side, feeling part of the chair’s frame splinter and crack. The air filled with dust, choking the lungs and making my eyes swim.

To my right, I was aware of Estella crawling blindly on the floor. I tried to move my arms, surprised to find that the rope around my wrists had come undone. I was free! Disentangled from the broken chair, I felt around for the syringe before locating it, still sticking in my upper arm. With a wince, I pulled it out, relieved to see that the plunger had not depressed.

“That’s mine!” Estella screeched, launching herself toward my back through the dust. The syringe skittered across the floorboards as we rolled over one another, a tangle of arms and legs. Her fingers hooked into my hair and pulled down hard as the nails of her other hand raked my arm. I let out an uncontrollable cry of pain. Anger surged through me as she forced me down to the floor with a triumphant laugh. Breaking free of her grasp, I drew back my fist and cracked it across her jaw with a strength that surprised me. Pain exploded through my knuckles, but Estella stumbled, her eyes glazing over as she hit the floor.

Not wasting a second, I scrambled for the fallen syringe. Estella was crawling away, still woozy from my right hook. I grabbed her shoulder and pressed the tip of the needle to her neck.

“No!” she gasped, freezing in fear, her eyes wide and locked to mine. “You don’t know what you’re doing! You’ll kill me!”

I smiled at her. "Isn't that the idea?"

"Alright," she said, beaten now as she slumped in my grip, the hardness draining from her eyes. One hand snaked up my arm, caressing my skin -- still the seductress, even in defeat. "You don't have to do it. Just tell me what you want."

I removed the point of the needle, but kept it poised, gripping her wrist securely with my other hand and twisting until she winced with pain. "I want the count. Get me on to the estate."

She gasped, but a smile played across the woman's lips as she reached out and stroked her fingertips across my forearm. "Why didn't you just ask more forcefully in the first place? You've proved that you're more than able to handle yourself..."

"Don't," I said pushing her away as her lips began to inch closer to mine once more. I saw a strange excitement flashing in her eyes at my power, completely replacing the cold contempt with which she had regarded me earlier.

"I will do as you wish," she said softly, making no further attempts to touch me or break free. "I will contact you as soon as I can, Miss Blaine."

"How?"

"We already know where you live," she confessed, casting her eyes down now as if suddenly bashful. I almost shook my head in bemusement at the shift in her behaviour. "One of my people will call your private number, if that is acceptable."

I regarded the syringe in my hand before stabbing it into the floorboard at Estella's feet, rendering it useless. "Yes, that will be acceptable. Goodbye."

I scrambled to my feet quickly and turned back to what remained of the exit, now a yawning hole onto the landing. Behind me I made out a sharp intake of breath from Estella and wondered for a moment if she was planning another attack. But she merely lay on the floor where I had left her, gazing after me.

As I walked out onto the landing, carefully avoiding the holes in the floor, the full extent of the damage could be seen. Half of the building had been destroyed by the falling bomb and a gaping hole in the far wall was open to the night. Jurgen and Klaus were nowhere to be seen as I descended the unstable stairs. Klaus' mangled body was at the bottom of the staircase where he had been thrown by the blast. Poor Klaus.

However, what I saw as I walked out onto the street turned my blood cold...

The alley where I had left Bentley was now a pile of smoking rubble from the blast! With a cry, I ran across the street and started clambering over the broken masonry, calling out his name. A stifled groan to my left caught my attention and I grabbed at a pile of bricks, pulling them away with all my strength. The major was there, lying in the ruins, his uniform and hair white with brick dust. I clutched his shoulders and pulled him up as the rubble shifted under us.

"I was supposed to be protecting you," he said breathlessly as we stumbled away from the wreckage. I smiled and shrugged, brushing some of the dust from his shoulders as I did so.

"You did," I replied. "Just knowing you were there was enough."

"Did you get what we needed?"

Before I could answer, however, a sound from the rubble of the building across the street made us both turn. Bentley grabbed my arm at the sight of Jurgen stumbling, plainly disorientated, from the doorway, a pistol clutched in his hand. The major was already pulling me away over the piles of brickwork that had been the alleyway.

"He mustn't see us together or your cover's blown," he hissed in my ear as he pushed us on.

"Your car..." I said breathlessly, thinking of the staff vehicle Bentley had arrived in and parked four streets away.

“He’ll see us before we reach it.” We made for a set of steps leading down toward the railway tunnel. Behind us I could hear Jurgen’s footsteps following. Our flight over the rubble had obviously given away our position. As we made the darkness of the tunnel, the major pressed me into the shadows. My heart was beating fast and I felt my superior’s breath coming quickly following our dash. I pressed myself into his body as he fumbled at the holster under his jacket.

“Dammit!” Bentley cursed, meeting my eyes in the gloom. “I must have lost my gun in the explosion.”

At the end of the tunnel, Jurgen’s broad, muscular figure ran into view, peering into the darkness with the gun held at the ready. I felt Bentley tense against me, but I pushed away from him, a sudden impulse taking me as I ran into the light, my hands raised.

“Stop!” I cried out as Jurgen raised the gun. “Why are you following me?”

The German frowned in confusion for a second before levelling the weapon at my forehead. “So you got away from the mistress! But not from Jurgen!”

“She let me go.”

“Nonsense!”

“Perhaps you should ask her what happened before you shoot.” I heard Bentley moving around in the cover of darkness behind me. “She won’t be pleased if any harm comes to me.”

Jurgen’s hand wavered for just a second before his eyes narrowed once more and he took a closer aim.

Then Jurgen dropped like a stone, the pistol falling from his grasp. Bentley stood over him, a shattered brick gripped in his fist. I ran and threw my arms around the major, almost sobbing with relief as he dropped his makeshift weapon beside the German.

“Excellent work, Miss Blaine.”

“Is he...?”

“Dead? No. But he’ll have a hell of a headache in the morning. He looked unsteady on his feet anyway. If anyone in the organisation asks questions, say that he collapsed on his own.”

I looked into his eyes, seeing the excitement there and feeling some of it myself, chasing away my fear.

“You love all this, don’t you?” I said.

“Why? Don’t you?” The major smiled enigmatically and closed his hand over mine. “Come on. There’s something I want to show you.”

Chapter Five

“Where are we going?” I asked, having to walk fast to keep pace with the major as we strode down the nondescript corridor. We were in the basement of a building to which Bentley had driven with little explanation. As we came to a halt at a pair of steel doors, the two bored-looking soldiers who flanked it immediately snapped to attention at Bentley’s approach. He glanced at me briefly, clearly enjoying the mystery.

“I’m taking you to the Tate,” he said, noting my confused frown. The Tate Gallery was some two miles away down the Thames. “And the National Gallery. And the Victoria and Albert Museum. All wrapped up in one.”

He nodded to the nearest soldier, who proceeded to draw back the bolt on the doors, throwing them open for us.

“Close the door behind us,” Bentley commanded. “No one is to come in until I’ve finished.”

“Sir!”

We stepped into darkness and I sensed Bentley reaching for a switch as the doors closed behind us. Strip lights flickered grudgingly into life overhead, illuminating a surprisingly massive space, an underground warehouse completely hidden from the world

above. Yet it was the contents of the space that were most amazing of all: racks of paintings numbering in the hundreds crowded together, forming aisles and walkways; statues and sculptures stood amidst the racks, some half-covered with drapes; boxes and crates were almost stacked to the ceiling, stencilling on the side revealing that they contained historical artefacts and treasures too countless to name.

“What is this place?” I said, more than a little awestruck, looking round to see that Bentley was suitably pleased by my reaction.

“The most precious works of art from the city’s galleries are here,” he explained. “Safe from Hitler’s bombs. Many of the paintings people see in the galleries that are still open are copies made by convicted forgers. The war has found a way for everyone to do his duty.”

“Or hers.”

Bentley nodded at this as I walked past one of the racks, pulling up a drape to reveal the *Rokeby Venus*, resplendent and close enough to touch. Bentley reached out and stopped my hand as I moved to stroke a finger along the frame, unable to resist touching something that I had only ever seen on the wall of the National Gallery before.

“Careful, Miss Blaine,” he said, pulling my hand away. I nodded, still a little stunned by the spectacle as we walked on, the major pointing out various pieces of interest, displaying a broad knowledge of the artists and the locations of their work within the room. He took particular time describing a wonderful Turner depicting boats on the Thames at dusk, the sea and sky a swimming mix of red and delicate blues. I watched him intently as he spoke passionately about the painting and the painter. After a minute he stopped himself, catching my smile from the corner of his eye.

“What is it, Miss Blaine?”

“Just how often do you come here, Major Bentley?”

He shrugged his shoulders evasively. “Oh, I don’t know. Two or three times ... a week, maybe.” We both laughed at his admission. “It’s like having my own private gallery. Of

course, when we win the war all this will be returned to the public where it belongs, and I'll have to find something else to do with my spare evenings."

I caught my breath as he looked away. "Major Bentley. You almost sound sad at that."

"Everything will change when the war ends," he said with a solemn shake of his head. "But that's a good thing. It's what we're fighting for."

"Yes, it is."

Again I felt my heart skipping a beat in the presence of this man who stimulated my emotions in so many ways. Here he was showing me yet another facet to his nature, the art-lover as well as the military man of action, and I felt my desire rising for him once more. Almost as if sensing my thoughts, Bentley turned back to me, slowly taking off his jacket and draping it across his arm. As he moved closer I trembled a little in anticipation of his touch, which he chose to deny me, standing close enough instead for me to feel his breath on the skin of my neck.

"I've been coming here for the best part of a year, ever since they started warehousing the artwork," he said softly. "For our next training session I thought of introducing you to the blindfold as a trust exercise. But then I thought that this environment might be more ... stimulating."

With a swift motion, he reached to a pillar beside me, throwing a switch that cut the lights abruptly. We were thrown into a darkness that was almost complete in the windowless warehouse. It was impossible not to feel a little dizzy at the sudden deprivation of my sight, and I found myself reaching out to grasp the major's arm -- but my hand brushed through thin air. He had disappeared once more and I spun round, immediately losing my orientation.

"Stand still while your brain becomes accustomed to the darkness." Bentley's voice came from a few feet behind me. I turned a little, brushing against something solid in the dark. "And try not to trip over any of the paintings."

I stood motionless, aware of the sound of my breathing, almost as if the darkness had enhanced every noise in the room. My ears strained to hear something that might give away the position of the major, but there was nothing.

“The deprivation of one sense causes heightened sensitivity in the others.” His voice floated to me, seemingly from all around now as I twisted to locate him. Fingertips brushed my arm and I jumped, as much from the sensitivity of my skin as the surprise. I desperately wanted to reach out and grab at him, but restrained myself, trying to stand as still as possible, listening. It was insane, but I had the strangest idea that Bentley could see everything that I was doing, even in the pitch black. His power seemed limitless to me.

As if to prove this point, the hook at the back of my dress was unclasped at the neck and the frock fell forward, slipping down my body. I hadn’t even felt his touch as he undid the fastening. I caught it on my arms as it fell, then, in a leap of faith, let go. The dress slid to the floor. Now I felt the cool of the air in the darkened warehouse against my exposed skin in the good underwear that I had worn for the evening. Fingertips traced up my spine, no doubt feeling the goosebumps that were forming there from my heightened reaction to just about everything at that moment.

“Come with me.”

The voice behind me drifted away as it spoke. I turned and took a hesitant step forward, suddenly convinced that I was about to walk straight into one of the stacks of crates, bringing a crushing weight down upon me.

“Do you trust me, Blaine?”

Bentley’s voice floated somewhere out in front of me.

“I trust you.”

“Then follow me.”

I put my feet forward, one after the other, walking with increasing confidence into the blank wall of darkness before me. Amazingly, I did not make contact with any object, even

though I seemed to have walked for a considerable distance. I realised that my senses were playing tricks on me, but still I slowed, beginning to doubt myself.

“Why are you stopping?” The voice betrayed a hint of annoyance, as if my unwillingness to run into the unknown was a sign of betrayal. Major Bentley was proving himself once more to be a demanding master, and I desperately wanted to prove myself worthy of his teaching. I doubled my pace, actually closing my eyes to stop myself from peering into the abyss and trying to make out shapes that were impossible to see.

“Stop!”

I froze on the command, reaching out with my hand slightly and making contact with the edge of a crate that I would have walked straight into. I turned in the direction of Bentley’s voice and started forward again, not waiting for the invitation this time but showing that I trusted him enough that he would warn me if I were in danger.

“Very good, Miss Blaine,” he said approvingly. His voice seemed formless, almost as if he were part of the darkness engulfing me. “But walk slowly now. Stretch your arms out before you. You’re going to make contact with something.”

I followed his command and a second later my fingertips brushed against a smooth, wooden surface. My hands traced round the curved object before me, feeling its warmth and trying to make out the shape in the black. My breath caught as I sensed Bentley approaching me from behind. He made no discernible sound, yet my focused senses screamed out his proximity.

“Good, Miss Blaine,” he said. “I can tell that you sensed my approach.”

His hands found the top of my knickers and swiftly pulled them down, exposing my backside to the cool air. It seemed that any contact with the major at that moment had become unspeakably erotic to my whole being. I pressed myself against the curvaceous surface against which I was standing, arms and legs spread in a clear gesture of compliance with him. A second later his hands were on me again, and I could almost feel his hunger

through the tips of his fingers. Once again I had passed his test; now came the reward of closer contact with him. I so desperately wanted him to take me in the way that I had only been taken once before in my life.

What came next was, as ever, a surprise.

His firm hands closed around my buttocks, parting them to allow the air to play over the hidden trench of my backside. I gasped at the unexpected exposure. His thumbs stroked the inner softness of my cheeks, almost making contact with the forbidden entrance to my body. A shiver shot through my frame at the illicit caress.

“Have you been touched like this before, Miss Blaine?” he asked, his voice calm and in control, betraying no sign of arousal.

“I... No...” I realised that I was blushing, although in the darkness I do not know whose benefit it was for.

His fingers played over the cleft of my behind, running down the crease and stroking the sensitive skin within that I had never considered part of lovemaking before. The stimulation that coursed through me at his touch urged me to press my body against the wood of the curved sculpture. The surface had started to warm and I bit my lip to stifle a groan. The major shifted behind me. I sensed that he was kneeling now, something that was confirmed when I felt the softness of his tongue and the nip of his teeth playing over my buttocks. His hands gripped my hips and pulled them toward him so I was bent at the waist. Bentley’s tongue found the flesh that separated my sex and my backside, and administered a series of swift licks that made me cry out involuntarily at this new stimulation. His tongue moved upward, tracing my skin toward the dark region of my arse, licking over the tight entrance. My fingers pressed against the varnished surface for support as I stifled another cry of pleasure, my mind reeling at the enjoyment to be found in something that I would have never dreamed nor asked for. Yet, now it was happening, I could have begged him to carry on forever.

All too soon, however, he pulled away, pressing me firmly against the wood once more. I heard the rustle of his clothing, the slide of the buttons on the front of his trousers as he freed himself from the constraints of the material. He ran a free hand over my expectant arse once more. Did he really intend to do what I suspected? It was almost as if he sensed my mixture of excitement and trepidation at the prospect of something that I had only heard whispered about before ...

“Do you remember our codeword from the last training session, Miss Blaine?”

“Yes, sir. Odessa.”

“Say it at any time and I stop. Understand?”

“Sir.”

Then he was on me, his hips pressing against the softness of my backside as his cock stroked up between my legs. In the darkness I was aware of him moving away briefly to retrieve something from the ground. I heard a soft pop as he pulled a stopper from a bottle. He moved slowly behind me, and I heard the sound as he stroked his own wet flesh. I bit my lip to stop from moaning aloud with excitement. The anticipation was delicious as he made me wait while he prepared himself. When his slick hand made its way round to my sex once more, he found me fully aroused, swollen and sensitive. He stroked me as his lubricated penis ground lightly against my backside, driving me almost to the peak of excitement. My legs felt weak and I was glad of the wooden object for support as I felt his other hand slide between my cheeks. His fingers reached forward to cradle and stroke the entrance to my cunt, while a slick thumb circled my arse and on each pass pressed a little further into me.

“Spread your legs. Remember, Miss Blaine. Odessa.”

I followed the command, and pushed back on that thumb, eager for more. The intimate massage went on forever, until, without warning Bentley pressed hard on my clitoris. Once more, had he not had a firm hold on me, my orgasm would have taken me to the floor. Before its shudders had passed completely, he squeezed inside me. There was a burning

sensation, and despite the shock of it, my pleasure began to climb again. I widened my stance a little more as he began to thrust himself further inside, quarter-inch by quarter-inch. A hand gripped my shoulder as I cried out, my mind awash with sensations of pleasure and discomfort, with the pleasure beginning to win. Now my own hips began to move against him, urging him further even as the sensible part of me urged a cry of *Odessa* that would bring the new experience to an end. Finally, after what seemed like an age, I heard Bentley give out a little gasp that betrayed his own rising excitement as he finally worked his way inside me to the hilt.

Our bodies were pressed together now for the first time and his hands came to rest on my hips, urging them into an action with which they were only too willing to comply. I ground my behind against him in a rising, falling motion that sent waves of sensation up the tight passage into which he had squeezed himself. Soon we were moving together in perfect time, the thrusting of his hips mirroring the complimentary motion of mine. I was rising to orgasm fast and was relieved to hear him finally let out a groan that betrayed his own peaking excitement, some of his military reserve finally slipping. I circled my hips against him and he grabbed my hair, pulling my head back roughly as he came, warm semen shooting into me and filling my passage with sensation that made me come almost instantaneously. Bentley delivered another pump of his cock that drove me to a higher level, screaming out his name as I collapsed against the surface of the wood.

Bentley's hands gripped my arms and eased me to the floor as he gently pulled out of me. I found that I was sitting on a kind of plinth rather than the cold floor and smiled in the darkness as the major draped his jacket over my shoulders once more in his usual gentlemanly gesture. A click sounded, and a torch broke the darkness weakly in the cavernous warehouse. I saw his face before me as he reached to set the light on the floor between us.

"Be prepared," he said with a wry smile as he saw me looking questioningly at the torch. I shifted my position, aware of a discomfort in my hips that would pass, mixed with

the dying ecstasy he had provoked in me once more. Once again the major's training session had opened a new world of possibility to me, and I couldn't help but fantasise that his actions that night were just the beginning of a long relationship.

"Do you bring all the trainees here then?" I asked, trying to make the question sound light, like a joke. The seriousness of his expression when he replied sent a shiver through my still shaking body.

"Only you, Miss Blaine. I've never brought anyone to this place before."

Our eyes met for an intense moment before I looked up at the wooden sculpture towering over us. From what I could make out in the muffled light, it was an abstract, the curved lines reminiscent of a reclining woman.

"She's beautiful," I said.

"A Henry Moore," Bentley explained. "My favourite sculpture here."

I nodded and stroked a hand across her smooth underbelly.

"I was glad of her support," I said, looking round at the major's questioning expression. "We ladies have to stick together, Major."

He smiled at that, but his expression soon darkened again. "I wanted to congratulate you, Miss Blaine. You've achieved more than we could have thought possible in a short time. I just wish I had more time to train you ..."

So do I, Major Bentley, I thought, but said instead, "Your training has been invaluable, sir."

"I just want you to know," he continued, "going to the estate, meeting the count, is going to be no walk in the park. They'll do everything they can to expose you as an agent. That's why I'm coming with you. I can't be with you all the time, but I'll stick close in case you need me."

I smiled at him and pulled his jacket closer around me. "That will make all the difference, Major. Now, tell me some more about this sculpture."

Bentley nodded and looked up at the massive, curvy woman. “Well, we first got close when she was brought here from the Tate ...”

Chapter Six

“So, you had a run-in with Estella von Friedrich,” Bentley said as we walked in the park near my apartment two days later.

“She’s German?” I asked as we stopped at a park bench and sat.

The major shook his head. “Her father is Austrian but she grew up in England with her brother. They’re some of the richest landowners in the country. We’ve also suspected them of having Nazi sympathies for a long time, but never had the proof to arrest them. The tattoo you noticed proves it: all high ranking members of the organisation bear the mark ...”

The tattoo. The snake coiled around the swastika. The sect. My heart raced once more with the excitement of being with the major and going over all the details of the case.

“You know now that my interest in Miss Carlisle is more than purely professional,” he said finally as we sat together, turning his face back to mine again so I could see the deep pain there. “I’ve been ordered to get to the bottom of her case by my superiors. Find out how she disappeared ...”

I couldn’t help but feel a kind of rivalry growing with this woman whom I had never met and who yet had such a hold over the man I wanted. However, I said nothing, nodding that I understood, encouraging him to speak more.

"I was her handler, just as I'm yours, Miss Blaine. At first Catherine loved it, the intrigue, the ... sexual adventure. We both did. But the deeper she got the more scared she became. Believe me, Catherine was one of the bravest agents I've ever met, but the people she was dealing with were pretty serious. She asked me to take her off the case, but ... I had orders from on high to keep her in the game. She was closer to the Nazi sect than anyone else had managed to get. And that's when she started behaving oddly. Developed some strange ideas..."

"Strange ideas?" I questioned.

"Started talking about how the ministry couldn't be trusted. Got it into her head that we would be better off without them. Sometimes she even sounded like she..." His voice trailed away, and I decided not to press him on the matter.

"Did she tell you what was going on with her investigations at the time?" I asked instead, and he shook his head.

"Her reports had become garbled and she had started disappearing for days at a time. When she came back she was ... distant. I should never have sent her to that last meeting."

I placed a hand on his arm but he pulled away.

"That's why I can't get too close to you, Agatha," he said, meeting my eyes. "I mixed business with love and it led to an agent losing her life. If we hadn't been so close ... maybe I wouldn't have been able to persuade her to make that last meeting."

"You don't know that."

Bentley looked back toward the entrance to the park where his grey staff car was waiting. "She's not coming back, I can feel it."

He rose from the bench and held out a hand for me. "I have to get back to the ministry, but I want you to contact me if von Friedrich tries to get in touch. I don't want you going to the estate without my knowing."

I felt a surge of disappointment that he didn't think me up to the job, but then reminded myself of the turmoil he was going through. I wondered if a man could ever get over such an intense love as the one Bentley and Catherine Carlisle had shared once it was lost. I just didn't know.

Bentley picked up a bag that he had brought with him and placed it on the bench between us. "A present from Lady Richmond," he said, indicating that I should take it. Intrigued, I produced a box from the bag, opening it to reveal a pair of smart, black shoes. I picked them out of the bag. They were my size.

"Very stylish," I said as I moved to put them on. Bentley took the right shoe from me, however. He pressed the heel, revealing a small compartment out of which fell a shiny metallic object about the size of his finger. He handed me the object.

"It's a camera," he explained. "Could come in handy for gathering evidence."

I laughed out loud, looking at the tiny object. "A camera?" I said incredulously. The last camera that had taken my picture had been the size of a wireless and mounted on a tripod.

"The latest technology," Bentley explained. "Top secret stuff. And it works. Most of the time."

I slid open the casing of the little machine, revealing a tiny viewfinder, lens, and trigger. I held up the camera and made to take a photograph of Bentley's face, but he stayed my hand.

"Don't waste them," he warned. "It's only good for five pictures. Then it's used up."

"It's a sort of disposable camera," I mused as I placed it back in the heel of the shoe.

"That's not bad," Bentley replied. "I'll tell that one to the boffins. The other shoe has a similar compartment, but it's empty. Our agents behind enemy lines conceal suicide pills there, but I've left yours empty." I looked at him and he smiled. "I have no intention of you having to use one, Miss Blaine."

We finished our meeting and I walked home alone through the afternoon sunlight. Back at my flat, the telephone was ringing as I walked through the door.

“A car from Estella von Friedrich will pick you up outside your apartment in ten minutes, if it pleases you Miss Blaine,” a man’s voice announced on the other end.

I raised an eyebrow. “And why would I want to be picked up?”

“My mistress says that she has what you requested,” the man replied. “Information. And more. The mistress says that she remains your humble slave, not fit to lick ...”

I replaced the receiver in its cradle, cutting him dead to keep them guessing, but I immediately started to get ready for the meeting, pulling fresh lingerie from my cupboard along with several of the outfits that Lady Richmond had provided from her stores at the ministry. I had no intention of missing my rendezvous, but there was just time enough to place a call to the ministry.

Five minutes later I walked out the front door of my flat block to find a sleek, silver Rolls-Royce waiting for me, its engine idling as if there were no petrol ration. A muscular chauffeur emerged from the front as I approached. I noted that his uniform was incredibly tight-cut and made of leather as he held the door open, regarding me with a knowing look.

The interior of the Rolls was lined with plush, red velvet from floor to ceiling, black curtains drawn over the windows for privacy and only dimly lit by electric lights in the shape of candles. Estella von Friedrich herself was draped across the back seat, dressed in a skin-tight black dress, stockings, and high-heels. I took a seat without acknowledging her as the car moved away slowly. I felt a twinge of anxiety, wondering for a second if the woman’s submissive mood had persisted from the other night, or if I had just walked into another trap.

“Was my driver impertinent to you, miss?” Estella asked breathlessly, running a nail down my arm from the shoulder. “He has been punished many times for not knowing his place.”

I knocked her hand away swiftly and met her eyes. She averted them submissively, and I knew that it was going to be okay. I thought of the scratches on my arm where she had clawed me and struck out at Estella impulsively with the back of my hand. She let out a gasp of pain-tinged excitement and bit her lip.

“That’s for trying to kill me the other night,” I said, sitting back and studying the other woman.

Feeling my eyes on her, Estella writhed toward me on the velvet seat like a hungry snake, hands stroking up my legs and lifting my skirt. Within seconds she was on her knees before me and reaching for my knickers. I pushed her back onto the floor of the car with my foot and gave a contemptuous laugh at her eagerness, realising that I had to stay dominant if I was going to control proceedings.

“First, business,” I said coldly as I pinned her down with a foot on her exposed neck. “Where are you taking me?”

Estella twisted her head and drew the end of her tongue along the edge of my boot. I twisted the point of my heel toward her and she tongued it also, eyes flashing with excitement at the degradation to which she was being subjected.

“Answer me,” I demanded, giving her a sharp kick in the ribs with my other foot.

“To my brother’s estate in Derbyshire,” she answered, caressing the leather of my boot as she did so. “He wants to meet you.”

“To get rid of me?” I suggested.

“No, mistress!” she protested. “I told him how you overcame me and he was fascinated. My brother is second-in-command of the sect. He can give you all the information you require and he’s not strong like me. You will control him ...”

She was desperate to gain my favour with information now as she spewed out a series of mostly useless facts about her brother and his estate. I silenced her again with another sharp kick.

“That’s enough,” I ordered.

“Have I pleased you, miss?”

“I’ll let you know when I meet your brother. Until then, you can shut up and stay on the floor.”

Estella’s eyes widened at this and she squirmed from under my feet, unhooking the straps of her dress as she did so and rose before me, naked apart from her stockings and garter belt.

“But you haven’t punished me properly yet, miss.” Even in submission she was demanding, and I gave a sigh of frustration.

She pulled back a hidden panel in the wall to reveal a rack of implements: a coiled whip, cruelly curved dildos, leather straps and manacles, hook-nosed masks and even knives. Estella proceeded to hook her hands through two leather straps set about three foot apart in the ceiling and turned her back to me, legs spread and arse tight.

“I have tortured many in the back of this car,” she said quietly. “Tonight I want you to spare nothing in your treatment of me. I deserve all the pain you wish to give.”

“Does your driver know where he’s going?”

“Yes, miss.”

“Does he understand that you follow my orders now?”

“I haven’t explained fully ...”

“Then do so!” I ordered harshly, releasing my grip on her and sitting back on the seat.

Von Friedrich unhooked one of her hands and pressed a button. The privacy panel slid down, revealing the driver.

“Jones, listen to me,” she ordered. The chauffeur’s eyes looked in the rear-view mirror, registering only the briefest surprise at seeing his mistress half-naked with her hands in the straps.

"You are to follow Miss Blaine's orders as if they were my own. Her authority surpasses even mine. Do you understand?"

"Yes, ma'am," Jones replied.

Estella looked round at me. "I've done as you asked."

"Driver, stop the car," I said sharply. The chauffeur obeyed instantly, bringing the Rolls to a smooth halt at the side of the road.

"Get out," I ordered Estella, pushing open the door. She looked round at me in confusion.

"But, miss ..." she began as I pulled her roughly from the straps and pushed her out onto the street. We had reached the outskirts of the city and stopped on a deserted street, luckily for her. She stood by the car, vulnerable in the skimpy lingerie, and looked at me imploringly.

"How will I ..."

"Get home?" I finished the sentence for her. "Just find a cab driver and screw your way back to the city."

I shut the door and ordered the driver to pull away. He hesitated only for a second before moving the Rolls off up the street. I sat back on the velvet seat, unable to suppress a burst of laughter. In the mirror the driver's eyes were on me, smiling wickedly.

"Do you know how many times I've wanted to do that, miss?" he ventured, keeping his eyes on me as he drove.

I said nothing, running my hands over the softness of the décor, feeling suddenly sensual.

"How long until we reach her brother's estate, Jones?" I asked.

"A couple of hours, miss."

"Pull over somewhere private when you get the chance," I commanded. "There's something I want to do first."

“Absolutely, miss.”

We drove on for another twenty minutes. I pulled the curtains in the back so that I could observe the city passing by, houses gradually thinning out and turning into countryside. As we passed dense forest on one side of the road, the driver made a turn into a dirt track that snaked into the trees. He brought the car to a halt in a deserted clearing a few hundred yards from the turn-off and killed the engine.

“Is this private enough for you, miss?” he enquired, studying me in the mirror once more.

“It’s fine, Jones,” I replied. “I’d like to get out here.”

With a nod, he jumped out of the driver’s seat and came round to open the rear door, touching his cap as I emerged. It was around six and the sun still hung above the trees. Rain clouds were beginning to roll in although the humidity of the day had not decreased one iota. A drop of rain hit the bonnet of the vehicle and hissed as it contacted with the heat of the engine, sending up steam.

I took the chance to look my driver over once again, appreciating the fine curve of his muscles, taut against the restrictive leather of his uniform. For his part, Jones stood to attention while I circled, submitting to the inspection.

“Is there anything I can do for you, miss?” the driver asked, his voice the deadpan of a professional servant, but his eyes betraying growing excitement as I stepped forward and ran a finger from his defined pectorals down his tight stomach.

“Strip,” I ordered and he obeyed without question, slowly unzipping the jacket to reveal naked flesh criss-crossed in places with scars and cigarette burns. He kept his eyes on me as he slid down his leather pants and stepped out of his boots, semi-erect penis swinging as he did so. Finally, he stood before me, completely exposed in the hot summer air. Droplets of rain began to patter around us, and I watched as they began to hit his tight skin, running in little rivulets over his muscles and down toward his groin. Here and there his skin bore

the evidence of submission to his mistress: fading bruises along his ribs, cigarette and wax burns, scars from whip lashings.

“Is there anything else I can do for you, miss?” he said, his body trembling slightly in anticipation.

“You’ve done plenty,” Bentley said coolly, stepping out of the trees behind us and levelling his gun at the chauffeur. Jones regarded him wide-eyed as the major motioned for him to walk to the trees, where a uniformed officer appeared to lead him away.

“What will you do with him?” I asked, picking up the discarded uniform from the ground.

“My driver will take him back to the city. Keep him under wraps until our mission is over. Nice work with the von Friedrich woman. How did you get her out of the car so smoothly?”

I shrugged and gave a smile. “Oh, it was easier than I expected.”

Bentley holstered his weapon and began to unbutton his jacket, looking over the chauffeur’s uniform in my arms sceptically. “It looks a little tight, but it should be okay.”

“Are you sure this is going to work, Major?” I asked, casting my eyes over his muscular chest as he neatly folded his shirt and laid it across the bonnet of the car. “I mean, doesn’t the count know what you look like?”

Bentley took Jones’ jacket from my arms and squeezed himself into it, zipping up the front with a little grunt of exertion. “You’d be surprised, Miss Blaine. A servant’s uniform has the effect of making anyone invisible to men of the count’s class. Besides, I’ll be confining my movements to the servant’s quarters. You’ll be the one mixing with the party members up front.”

My heart raced at the thought, and Bentley sensed this, placing a hand on my shoulder. “From everything I’ve seen so far, you’ll do fine, Miss Blaine. I’ll find a way to contact you while we’re on the estate. Come on.”

Once again Bentley was all business when it came to the mission, although my mind was still running images of our experience in the arts repository. Looking around the deserted clearing I secretly wished for another such encounter and wondered how long we could dally there before we had to move on to the estate. Rather than giving voice to my thought, I watched as the major stripped out of his trousers, revealing firm, muscular legs. The leather chauffeur's trousers proved equally figure-hugging as he eased them on, pulling them over his hips with a little grunt of exertion. Looking him over, I wondered how long it would take him to get out of the uniform again, and if we had time for such a distraction. I certainly hoped so. Bentley, as ever, seemed able to read my thoughts as he held open the back door of the car for me to enter, running a hand over my arm to usher me in.

"I'll make contact with you late tonight," he reassured me as he placed the peaked chauffeur's hat on his head. "There's already an insider on the estate. I won't be far."

I smiled at him as I entered the back, feeling better already as he took the driver's seat and pulled the car away as smoothly as a professional.

Some two hours later the Rolls passed through the stark countryside of the Peak District to the imposing iron gates that marked the entrance to the grounds. A wide gravel road stretched through acres of manicured lawns, miniature lakes, ornate fountains, and topiary. Torches lit for the coming of the night marked the way down to the house. And what a house! Three stories high, it almost put Chatsworth to shame for its grandeur and the impression it made on the landscape. I looked through the window, taking in the scene, making out figures strolling in the grounds, enjoying the last light of the day.

"Be on your guard, Miss Blaine," Bentley whispered from the driver's seat. "There are some dangerous people here. Just get me something I can use against the count and get out as quickly as possible."

Bentley brought the car round in a wide arc at the front of the house, coming to a stop at the bottom of the flight of stone steps that led up to the columned entrance. A servant in a

plain black uniform had already appeared from the building and was ready to open the door for me.

“Welcome to the estate of Count Rufus Friedrich,” the man said properly, extending his hand for me to take as I climbed out of the car. Closing the door behind me, he signalled for Bentley to take the car round the side of the house, presumably to the servants’ entrance. Watching the car pull away, I felt suddenly very vulnerable, but reminded myself that there was a job to do. After everything that I had experienced, nothing could surprise me here, could it? All the same, I wished that Bentley were walking into the building with me.

“I can’t express what a pleasure it is to finally meet you, Miss Blaine.”

The voice that floated down from the top of the stairs was deep, sensual. I looked up to see a man dressed in a black suit, but there was no mistaking him for one of the servants. He was standing with his feet apart at shoulder width, suggesting a powerful, almost confrontational attitude as I ascended the steps toward him slowly. His hair was jet black, like that of his sister, Estella, but his features were slightly softer with eyes that took me in and seemed to caress me as I stood before him. He took a breath of his cigarette and extended a hand toward me.

“I’m Count Rufus,” he said informally as I placed my hand in his. He held me gently, bending smoothly to kiss my fingers, lips lingering on my skin for just the slightest moment longer than would be considered proper. When he straightened I noticed his tongue run over his lips for an instant, tasting me.

“I was expecting my sister to be with you.”

“She was called back to London,” I said quickly.

“That’s too bad,” the count said with a slight shrug. “I was looking forward to seeing you ... together. But, then again, she can be such a bore sometimes. So very angry, don’t you think?”

"I really couldn't say, Count Rufus," I replied, studying him carefully, trying to work him out. His genteel and friendly manner was certainly a million miles away from his sister's style. He seemed the very image of an English gentleman in his accent and attitude. Could he really be a Nazi? A female servant dressed in black uniform appeared at the count's side. He acknowledged her with a nod.

"Sarah, this is Miss Blaine," he informed the servant woman. "Please show her to her room and help her to prepare for dinner. I'm sure that she could use a warm bath and a change of clothes after her trip."

I was unable to stop myself from running a hand through my hair, but found myself smiling at the Count. It was certainly an unexpected introduction to the man I intended to bring down for treason.

"Sarah will be your personal servant during your stay, Miss Blaine," he explained, making it clear that I would be there for at least one night. "She will attend to your every need. You can ask for anything."

"I hope I won't be that demanding," I replied demurely, meeting the woman's eyes for an instant and then looking back to the count.

"Sarah is used to demanding guests, believe me," he said as he turned and walked back into the house. "I'll have you for dinner in one hour. Feel free to choose anything you like from the closet in the room. My sister has arranged some items that she thought would be suitable for you."

I raised an eyebrow at the comment about having me for dinner, wondering if his English was so perfect after all or if he meant what he said. I remained silent, however, as I was led through the main hall of the house and up a marble staircase to the first floor. Everything within the house spoke of wealth and privilege, from the elaborate paintings on the ceilings to the tapestries and portraits that adorned the walls, and I realised that I had never stayed in such an impressive building. Here I was, the houseguest of a man from whom

I had to gain information for my country, yet, upon our first meeting, I found myself instantly attracted in a manner that confused me greatly. I tried to think of Major Bentley and my overriding desire for him as I was shown into one of the bedrooms on the first floor.

Chapter Seven

“That dress looks simply stunning on you, Miss Blaine,” Count Rufus said as he took my hand lightly and led me to my seat in the massive dining room. He pulled the chair away from the table for me and I sat. “My sister may have many faults, but she is an excellent judge of dress size on a woman.”

He walked round the table once more, taking his place at the other end. I almost laughed at the strange formality of the situation: the distance between us, the silver candlesticks almost blocking our view of one another, the echoes of the room. The count must have seen the amusement in my eyes for he let out a short burst of laughter himself.

“Yes, it’s odd, I know,” he said as he raised an already filled wine glass to me in a toast. “Formality is the curse of my class, but it can also be so very stimulating. I hope that you will come to see that in time.”

I raised my own glass to him, but only took a small sip, wanting to keep my wits about me with the man. The count clapped his hands together and more black-clad servants entered the room carrying soup bowls and a tureen. I looked them over as they set to work placing the bowls in front of us and serving up a fragrant onion soup from a silver ladle. They were all fine specimens, both male and female, mostly blonde and in their early twenties.

“I take it that Sarah explained about the unusual working arrangement we have here,” he offered, seeing me examining the young woman pouring soup into the bowl before me. “In my position as a patron of many charities, I am closely involved in a number of initiatives for young people in the deprived inner cities. I find it a useful way for my people to identify young individuals with special talents and an affinity for the kind of work that I offer at my estate.”

“And what kind of work would that be?” I enquired.

“Oh, cleaning, serving my guests ...” the count began as the female servant finished ladling soup from the tureen into his bowl. He ran his hand slowly up the back of her leg so that I could see what he was doing, pushing up her skirt and stroking her inner thigh. The servant had to grasp the table for support as he continued to caress her. The motion as she rocked against the table caused the bowl of soup before the count to vibrate, spilling some of the contents onto the pristine white tablecloth.

“Now look what you’ve done,” the Count said to the servant girl, working his hand harder as he did so.

“I’m ... sorry, sir,” she murmured in reply, barely able to speak, gasping in excitement at his rough treatment, but clearly enjoying it.

“Report to the punishment room when I have finished with my guest,” the count said, finally releasing her and sitting back in his seat. “You need a good telling off tonight.”

“Yes, sir,” she said, chastised, as she backed away from the table and exited the room along with the other servants. The count for his part smiled to himself, satisfied with his performance as he ran the fingers with which he had felt the servant under his nose sensually before lifting his spoon to taste the soup.

“Perhaps you will find my methods of estate management shocking,” he said, looking back at me challengingly. “They are not to every guest’s taste.”

I met his gaze evenly, taking a sip of my own soup deliberately. "I'm interested in finding out more, Count Rufus. The way you run your estate intrigues me greatly."

He nodded in approval at this response and we both concentrated on the excellent soup for a while. When we finished, the servants were quick to clear and bring on the next course: roast venison in a red wine sauce served with steamed vegetables. I raised my glass to the Count once more, praising the quality of his kitchen staff. He began to speak passionately of the utopian ideals with which he ran his household: none of his servants received pay yet all were willing members of his extended family, wanting for nothing. The count so far sounded like anything but a Nazi, and I was beginning to doubt my earlier certainty about him and his sister. In fact, my growing fascination with this strange, intriguing man was beginning to overtake my earlier plans to bring him to swift justice. Could it be that everything I had learnt so far had been wrong, some kind of mistake? I had to know.

"I'm interested in your politics, Count," I said as I finished the last of my meat and took a sip of my wine. Almost immediately my plate was cleared by an eager young servant girl.

He raised an eyebrow and smiled. "You want to know if I'm a Nazi."

For a moment, his directness shocked me.

"Come, come, I doubt that there's a person in London who hasn't heard the gossip," he went on before I could speak. "My sister has some strange ideas, Miss Blaine. Her sexual urges have led her into some strange company. I don't approve of all of her friends, but I do understand her ... needs. Some of them I share. But I'm not a traitor to my country, I assure you. And neither is my sister."

"She has a tattoo of a swastika," I said, finishing the last of my wine and setting it down on the table. The glass was instantly refilled.

The count looked away for a moment and sighed. "I won't deny that we've both made our mistakes, Miss Blaine. Before the war, many people in this country were taken in by friendly representatives of Herr Hitler promising a better order in Europe. A chance to

sweep away the old restraints. I soon realised that their rhetoric was an empty attempt to mask their lust for power. It took my sister a little longer. And now the Ministry of Defence seems intent on hounding us when there are real spies loose in the country.”

I smiled and sipped at my wine once more. “I guess there’s no point in denying my curiosity.”

“None whatsoever.” He studied me for a moment. “My ideals are for a better society, not a Nazi rule in England. Perhaps you would consent to judging for yourself over the next few days.”

“I’d be happy to do that,” I said, feeling the first twinge of doubt over my mission and my role. With Bentley everything seemed so straightforward, so black and white, but the count was one massive grey area. The least I could do would be to give him a fair hearing.

He nodded and clapped his hands together. Servants entered the room and cleared the table of the dinner plates and all other objects, even the candlesticks, leaving between us only the white tablecloth, pristine except for the soup that the count had provoked the serving girl to spill. Serving plates made of highly polished silver were placed in the middle of the table between us stacked with luscious fruits, the likes of which I had not seen since the start of the war. The servants stepped back to wait respectfully around the edge of the room.

“Good,” he said, picking up a brilliant red apple from the nearest plate and taking a bite. “Let’s seal our agreement over dessert. Tomorrow you will join our annual hunt as my guest of honour.”

* * * * *

The card was waiting for me on the pillow of my bed when I returned to my room half an hour later. Thankfully, Sarah was so concerned over fetching my nightwear as she entered the room that she walked straight past the message that had been left so prominently. I

pocketed it quickly and explained to Sarah that I had been preparing myself for bed since I was six and was more than capable of undressing myself.

The note was brief, handwritten. I was to wait an hour before leaving the house by the servant's stairs at the end of the corridor. Across the courtyard I was to enter the garages. The note was signed with a *B*. I read it twice and then disposed of it quickly in the flame of the bedside candle.

Sixty minutes crawled by, during which time I paced the room in my nightgown and boots, mind racing with the events of the day. My excitement at a meeting with Bentley and my natural fear that we might be discovered mixed with my growing confusion over the count. His intelligence and seemingly reasonable character -- unusual relationship with servants aside -- seemed far removed from the violence of Estella von Friedrich and her cronies. I wondered if Bentley was aware of this contradiction in his character.

Somewhere in the house a clock chimed twelve, signalling my time to move. I turned the handle of the bedroom door, half expecting to find it locked, that I had already been made a prisoner. It was not, although it turned with a noise that seemed to split the silence of the nocturnal house. The corridor outside the room was deserted also; no watcher had been posted. I found my way to the narrow stairs that the servants used to access the upper rooms of the house with ease. As I moved through the moonlit kitchens to the door that led out to the courtyard it almost seemed too easy for a moment.

Crossing the cobbled courtyard I found the door to the stables -- converted into garages for the Count's cars -- standing ajar. Thin beams of moonlight, filtering through cracks in the roof, punctuated the darkness. I stood on the threshold for a moment, allowing my eyes to adjust to the darkness, remembering Bentley's advice from the arts repository. The shapes of rows of vehicles became apparent: Rolls-Royces and Bentleys, as well as smaller sports vehicles that I couldn't identify, and a few motorcycles.

"Major!" I whispered as I advanced into the room, my hand running along the sleek bodywork of one of the cars as I went. Something moved in the corner of the building, and I

spun round, stifling a cry as the shape of a rat scuttled for cover. A hand grabbed me from behind, pulling me into the back of the nearest vehicle.

"I hope I didn't scare you, Miss Blaine," Bentley said as he placed me on the leather seat beside him.

"Not at all, Major," I whispered back. "I'm getting quite used to being grabbed in the dark by you. It's not at all unpleasant."

I couldn't see clearly in the shadows, but I was sure that he had raised an eyebrow at that. As my eyes adjusted to the light of the interior I made out that he was still dressed in the chauffeur's uniform.

"I hope that you've been well treated in the servant's quarters, Major Bentley," I ventured.

Bentley sniffed. "Some of the working arrangements on the estate seem to be ... modern, to say the least. Judging by the commotion in the kitchen, you and the count were well fed at least."

I detected an edge in his voice that surprised me. "The Count has been a most gracious host, so far, Major Bentley. To tell the truth, I've been rather surprised."

Bentley gave a harsh laugh and shook his head. "Gracious? I suppose that anyone can be gracious with enough fruit and meat in his larder to fill two hundred ration books for a week. Or did you not consider that when you were enjoying your meal, Miss Blaine?"

"I'm afraid I did not, Major Bentley," I responded, realising that my own voice was showing annoyance at his tone. "I was more interested in finding out about the estate and exactly where the count's politics lie. So far, he has seemed anything but the National Socialist to me -- "

"And I don't suppose you considered that he would be willing to say anything to save his neck now that we're finally closing in?"

“Perhaps. But the Count seems more than happy for me to see the workings of his estate so that I might judge for myself. I’m surprised that you haven’t yet confronted him face to face about his politics. I mean, doesn’t every man deserve a fair hearing?”

Bentley surprised me by moving forward and grabbing both my arms, pulling my face close to his. I could see his eyes flashing with anger even in the darkness.

“The Count has had many chances, Miss Blaine. Believe me. Don’t be seduced by his lies so easily.”

“Is this really about him? Or Catherine Carlisle?”

Bentley held me there for a moment. For the first time I was afraid of his strength, aware of the pent up anger within him. He loosened his grip, shoulders falling slightly.

“It’s ... about them both.”

“Major ...” I began, but already his hands were on my shoulders, turning my body away from him and pushing me against the leather of the seat. He pulled the nightgown over my head, leaving me naked but for the boots as I knelt before him. His hands gripped my thighs roughly, pulling my legs apart and silencing any more debate on the issue of the count for that night. His haste surprised me, but I realised that it was a symptom of the turmoil that he had suffered, and I allowed him to do as he wished.

The leather was smooth and cool against my bare flesh as I spread my legs further for him. He ran his hands over me, feeling the spreading wetness there.

“Don’t move,” he commanded. I obeyed, except to cast a glance back at him. He’d freed himself from the leather of the uniform, and was rolling on a rubber.

Bentley wasted no time in sliding himself inside, as if desperate to put paid to my doubts. He placed his hands on my hips and pulled me closer to him with every thrust. I steadied myself against the seat with my right hand as I placed the meat of my left between my teeth to stop from crying out in the silence of the garage.

"You work for me, Blaine," he gasped as his rhythm increased, sending surges of pleasure through my thighs, and shooting up into my womb. "Say it ..."

"I work for you ..."

"Only me ..."

"Only you ..."

"Say it again," he demanded, voice thick with excitement. "Say it."

My own excitement grew now, feeling the uncontrollable pleasure that my compliance released in him. I'd never felt my own powers so acutely.

"Only you, Major."

"Only me."

"Only you."

Bentley came with a stifled cry. My own body responded and I pumped my hips against him, drawing the last drop of pleasure as he writhed against me. I came hard and fast in response, jerking my hips as he held me in place on his cock.

As the major relaxed and withdrew from me, his hands traced down my spine, tender again now that the heat of the moment was spent. I turned and fell into his arms, laying my head on his chest for a moment as we breathed heavily against one another. An unexpected noise outside made us both stiffen, and Bentley looked round.

"Just the wind moving the door," he whispered as we crouched against the seat. Our faces were close and our eyes met. I felt his hand stroke my cheek. Even in the darkness I could detect his troubled expression again. "I ..."

I placed a finger to his lips. "You don't have to explain, Major."

Bentley nodded and felt for the nightgown, placing it carefully over my head. "You should get back to your room. But first, take this." He produced a key from his pocket and handed it to me. "I heard some of the servants talking about a green room in the east wing. Sounds very hush-hush. Only the count and his head butler are allowed access. It could

contain the evidence that we're looking for. I borrowed that key from the butler's office, but of course I can't go walking around above stairs. I thought maybe you ..."

"... could sneak a look inside," I finished for him, pocketing the key. "I'll try tomorrow night after the hunt dinner. The count and his guests should be drunk enough not to notice." Bentley smiled and nodded his approval. I reached for the door of the car, turning as I opened it.

"I'm going to get the evidence you need, Major Bentley," I told him. "I promise."

Bentley stirred in the darkness. "Just be careful. I assure you, the count can't be trusted."

His words rang in my ears as I crossed the silent courtyard just as his touch still lingered on my body.

Only him.

Chapter Eight

The morning air was crisp and invigorating as I watched the mist floating across the manicured grounds of the estate. At my side, Sarah fussed over the fit of the red and white hunting uniform that had been provided me. I waved her away saying that it was fine. The sound of dogs barking floated across the stillness of the dawn, and I looked round to see the handlers marshalling at least thirty hounds while the horses were led out of the stables.

“Do you ride often, Miss Blaine?” The count was walking down the steps toward us with his customary swagger, boots clicking against the stone as he went. I looked over at one of the massive steeds fighting against the control of one of the stable boys.

“Not for some time, I’m afraid, Count.”

He waved away my concerns with a sweep of his hand. “It’ll all come back within a few minutes of having one of those beasts between your legs. Always does, what do you say, Sarah?”

Sarah looked down, casting a sideways glance in my direction. “Yes, sir. Miss Blaine seems like she will be a natural in the saddle.”

The count raised an eyebrow. “Well, we’ll be the judge of that. About your business now, Sarah. Miss Blaine doesn’t need you walking on her heels all day.”

“Yes, sir.” Sarah withdrew back to the house and the count placed a hand on my upper arm lightly, leading me toward the waiting horses.

“The hunt isn’t to everyone’s taste, I realise,” he said. “Rather an affectation that I have to indulge in as part of good society. Some of my guests have found the whole thing too bloody in the past. One never knows who will turn out to have no stomach for the chase.”

I looked round at the massing dogs and horses. “It does all seem rather unfair though, don’t you think? I mean, all this to catch one little fox?”

The count laughed as he moved over to stroke the nose of a massive, black thoroughbred. “The farmers in the area wouldn’t see it that way, I assure you. They’re pests and vermin to them. Vermin should be wiped out, or at least controlled, don’t you agree?”

I opened my mouth to reply, but was cut short by the sound of another man approaching across the cobbles of the courtyard. He was a good deal taller than the count and several stone heavier, judging by the way his stomach spread over the band of his riding breeches.

“Is he boring you with a load of old rot about the hunt?” the red-faced man guffawed as he stepped between me and the count, his eyes running over me several times. “I assure you, it’s mainly about a bunch of half-drunk toffs chasing around the countryside and generally not catching a thing all day. The only one involved that gets any decent sport is the fox, no doubt.”

I laughed and looked at the count, who wore an amused smile that appeared just the slightest bit strained.

“Miss Blaine, I’d like you to meet Judge Lewis, one of our guests here this weekend.” The judge took my hand and bent to kiss it gallantly, looking back at the other man as he straightened up.

“By God, Rufus! Good to see you’re finally getting some interesting guests for me to converse with. Much better than the usual bunch of politicians and bores you invite to these

little dos.” He looked back at me and winked, more than a little lasciviously. “I expect to be seated with you at dinner, Miss Blaine. I will not take no for an answer.”

The count stepped forward to rescue me, leading the judge away in the direction of the stables. “Come on, Harry. Let’s find you a horse that won’t throw you at the first fence.”

I was left alone for a moment during which time I looked around, sighting Estella’s car parked by the side of the kitchens -- but no sign of Bentley. After our strained meeting of the night before I was eager to see him again and make amends for any doubts that I had shown. However, with the count on charming form once again, I was beginning to feel that things were only going to get more complicated.

The sound of cars approaching up the drive heralded the arrival of more of the count’s guests . Over the next hour, at least twenty more appeared and I was introduced to a confusing stream of politicians, judges, doctors, and high ranking members of the police, while servants hurried in and out of the house, struggling with bags and cases. Little wonder the major had found it a struggle convincing people of the count’s Nazi sympathies with such influential friends!

“I’m sorry about all that, Miss Blaine,” the count said finally, coming back to me as most of the guests began to assemble in their hunting uniforms in the courtyard. Stable boys bustled around, assigning people to horses for the day. “One has to be seen to invite the right people to these events.”

“I understand completely,” I replied as a stable boy advanced toward us leading two fine mounts.

The count took over of the reins and presented my horse to me. “I hope that I can make it up to you. Will you ride with me today?”

I nodded with a smile and put my foot in the stirrup, swinging my leg over the saddle and reaching down to pat the horse’s neck reassuringly as it bucked a little under me. The count nodded approvingly as he moved round to take his own mount for the day.

“You’re a natural, Miss Blaine. I knew it.”

In the distance the Master of the Hounds blew his horn, signalling that the hunt was on. A ripple of excitement went through the crowd milling in and around the courtyard. With a cry, the count kicked his horse into action and I followed him, galloping across the lawns of the estate toward the open countryside as the rest of the hunting party made suit to follow us.

The chase took us beyond the neatly organised lawns and hedges that surrounded the house, onto the rough terrain of the fields and meadows that surrounded the estate. The first fence I came to brought on a quickening of the heart rate, but I held the rein firm and allowed my knowledgeable horse to take it perfectly, already feeling a bond of trust growing between us. Slightly ahead, the count looked round to check that I had taken the first hurdle. He smiled, urging his ride faster when he saw that I was okay. I followed, matching his pace as we ran ahead of the less experienced riders in pursuit of the hound pack.

The sun broke through, burning off the mist as we raced past trees and over streams. The fox had broken cover across one of the fields to the excitement of the hounds. Our party raced in, sensing an imminent kill. The quarry was too smart for the dogs, however, finding escape in the dense trees of the forest. Over to our left a rider ran into the branch of a tree and came a cropper on the ground, howling with protest as his horse turned tail and galloped back in the direction of the estate. The count rode up beside me and smiled wryly at the sight.

“Some of these fools don’t know one end of a horse from the other,” he said with a shake of the head, looking around as the party descended into general chaos, with dogs and handlers running among the startled horses on the edge of the trees. A noise to our left, amid the denser forest, made our heads turn.

“There!” I cried, pointing at a small pack of the older, more experienced dogs that were chasing into the undergrowth. “Come on!”

I was unable to disguise my excitement as I spurred my horse on, weaving between the trunks of trees with the count close behind me. The thrill of the chase was on us both and the horses sensed it also, their ears pricked as they jumped and followed the sound of the dogs. The trees parted suddenly, revealing a quiet clearing a few hundred yards across and there I saw the fox for the first time, running desperately for the nearest cover as three of the hounds made chase, snapping on its heels. The result was inevitable. I pulled my ride up as one of the dogs caught the fox's back leg between its jaws, bringing it down in a flurry of teeth and claws. The others were on it in an instant, and then... there was only a streak of red, tossed among the braying dogs. I looked away as the count screamed a command, calling off the hounds before they ripped their prey to shreds.

"Come, Miss Blaine, let's see what we have," he said, breathing heavily, his voice still thick from the excitement of our pursuit. He caught the rein from my hand and led my horse closer.

"No, I don't..." I began to protest, but it was no use. I had taken part in the thrill of the hunt, and now it only seemed fair to do the dying animal the courtesy of seeing the end result of it all. We dismounted and walked closer to the fox, which lay still and bloodied. A wave of nausea swept over me, and I had to fight from looking away as the count knelt before it, removing a white handkerchief from his pocket as he did so. I had been swept up in the moment, the adrenaline pumping excitement, but now I had to face the gruesome end. Was I so easily seduced? I thought of Bentley and wondered what he would have made of the scene...

"So beautiful," I heard the count say softly as he regarded the dead animal at his feet. He folded the material in his hands and stooped to dip it in the blood of the fox.

"This is a tradition for all those new to the hunt," he said, advancing toward me with the bloodied handkerchief in his hand. "It's called *blooding*. Your initiation ..."

Without warning, the count reached out and stroked the material against my cheek, smearing it with still-warm blood. My legs felt suddenly weak, overcome with the

heightened emotion of the scene, and I swayed a little. The count saw this and reached out with his hand to steady me, pulling me close as he did so. His lips found mine before I could resist, and he held me there, his kiss making me feel simultaneously weaker and more aware. I felt myself respond momentarily as his tongue ground against mine, closing my eyes in a half-gesture of surrender. Finally, I placed a hand on his arm and pushed him away. The count looked at me, a knowing smile playing over his lips as I took a step backward, my hand finding the rein of my horse.

“Sorry, Miss Blaine,” he said thickly as he dropped the soiled handkerchief to the ground by the fox. “I just couldn’t resist. Blame the hunt.”

A movement on the other side of the clearing made me look round, and I spotted a lone rider there, watching from the shadows of the trees. It was hard to make out her face, but I saw a flash of blonde hair as she whipped her horse and turned it back into the forest. I knew that I had not seen her in the hunting party when we left the estate. I looked back to the count, a question in my eyes that went unanswered as the rest of the hunting party finally caught up, streaming into the clearing where the trees were thinner. I quickly wiped the blood from my cheek with the back of my glove, not meeting the count’s eyes.

“Hounds didn’t leave much, I see,” snorted Judge Lewis, wrinkling his nose in disgust as he trotted over. “Bloody mess. What’s for lunch, Rufus?”

* * * * *

“Miss.” I turned to see Sarah standing in the entrance hall as I left the dining room later that evening. A wave of fatigue spread over me following my exertions earlier in the day. I was pleased to see her, imagining the plush bed waiting for me in the quarters I had been assigned.

“I hope you enjoyed dinner, miss.”

“The conversation could have been more interesting,” I replied as we moved back across the hall and up to the bedroom. As I had expected, Judge Lewis had arranged it so that

we were seated next to one another, something that was both a blessing and a curse. On the one hand, for the moment it kept me from having to face Count Rufus following the illicit kiss out in the clearing; on the other, it meant that I was subjected to endless anecdotes about the courts and to the judge's sexual innuendos. By the time dessert came, he was eyeing me as hungrily as he might the food set in front of us.

The dining hall had been full, in sharp contrast to the dinner that I had enjoyed with the count the night before. It seemed that the guests who had come for the hunt were staying for the weekend. I noted that they were all male. I also noted that the staff serving that night was made up mainly of the female members of the service. They moved among the diners, paying little heed to the hands straying over their legs and thighs as they went about their work. *Is this the count's game? Plying his guests with sexual favours? To what end?* Whatever, I began to feel uncomfortable as the only woman seated at the table, aware also of the count's eyes upon me for much of the evening. When I finally looked to him he raised his glass in a toast.

"To another successful hunt!" The room erupted in applause, but I did not touch my glass. I had not heard from Bentley that day and could only assume that he had gone to ground somewhere on the estate. How would he have reacted if he had seen my kiss with the count? I wondered if he would have encouraged me, suggested that I used the count's interest in me to find out more information. Secretly I hoped that he would have been enraged, that jealousy would have shaken him out of his stupor over Catherine Carlisle. Soon after the count's toast, I excused myself and made to leave the room.

"You're retiring early, Miss Blaine," Count Rufus said, moving around the table to intercept me as I walked to the door. "So many of my guests have asked to meet you. And I haven't had the chance to talk to you all night."

I smiled demurely. "I'm sorry, Count, the hunt must have tired me more than I realised."

He clasped his hands together and nodded in understanding. "I hope that you did not find me too forward earlier. As I said, the hunt raises the passions ..."

I nodded and took my leave of him in silence. The atmosphere in the house was starting to feel oppressive, pregnant with a kind of expectation that something was about to happen. I prayed for some kind of note from Bentley on my return to the room, but found none. Frustrated, I lay down on the bed and waited for the sounds of the house to quiet before I made my move.

Chapter Nine

It was long after midnight as I eased myself along the corridor back toward the main hall. The lights of the house had been dimmed and the last guest had long since gone to bed, no doubt exhausted from the exertions of the hunt and the after-dinner drinking in the hall. I did not know where I was going, allowing my instincts to guide me, listening for sounds in the deserted house and aware that at any moment I might be confronted. The knowledge sent a thrill of excitement through me and I wished that Bentley was at my side, as much that he could share the thrill of the chase with me as the fear that was coursing through my veins.

A noise from the hallway below alerted me, and I pressed myself into the shadows just in time as the door to the house opened, casting a shaft of moonlight across the marble floor. The sound of a car idling outside came to my ears as I peered over the balcony to see a tall figure stride into the hall flanked by two muscular men wearing black trench coats. I looked to my left, seeing the corridor leading toward the green room and was momentarily torn. Making a decision, I made instead toward the edge of the balcony, crouching in the darkness so that I could look through the ornate banister rails.

“Colonel!” It was the count, appearing from the dining room and throwing his arms around the man, who returned the embrace stiffly. I moved round so that I could take a better look at the face of the stranger. My heart leapt at the sight of that face: the scar across the chin, greying hair and monocle. It was the face from the picture that Bentley had shown me that day: Colonel Kremp, the spy runner.

“It has been too long, my friend,” the Colonel said, clapping a hand on the count’s shoulder. “It has been harder getting in and out of the country recently. One of my men was lost at Cromer. Gunned down by some farmer with a shotgun and a uniform.”

The count shook his head. “Your presence this weekend means everything to our cause, Colonel ...”

I reached for my shoe, pulling open the compartment and retrieving the tiny camera that was hidden there. Turning it over in my hand, it seemed inconceivable that the little contraption would be able to take a photograph. But I held the viewfinder to my eye, centring on the Colonel and pressing the trigger, taking at least three more of the two men together before they turned and walked toward the dining room. I just hoped that it wasn’t too dark for the pictures to develop.

It was tempting to go down to the hall, to try to eavesdrop on their conversation further, but I remembered my primary aim: to gain entry to the green room. Moving low along the balcony, I took the corridor that led to the east wing, remembering Bentley’s directions. The door was located at the very end of the wing, standing alone and distinguished from the others by the fact that it was painted a dull green rather than stained oak. I felt in my robe and pulled out the key that I had been given, advancing toward my goal.

The copy key turned in the lock easily and I pushed open the door, feeling for the light switch. The room was small and spartan. In the centre was arranged a simple table and chair. The only other piece of furniture was the kind of plain, grey filing cabinet which would not have looked out of place in any city office. I closed the door behind me and crossed to the

cabinet, pulling open the top drawer, my heart beating fast with a mixture of fear and excitement. I was risking everything to collect this evidence. I just hoped that it was worth it...

The drawer opened stiffly, files and folders spilling out the farther I pulled. Running my hand over the contents I saw alphabetised names and dates recorded on each folder. I pulled one out at random. The fat folder contained a sheet of facts about one Edgar Crook, who it would seem was a low-level member of parliament, married with two children. The rest of the folder was stuffed with glossy black and white photographs of a short, slightly overweight man, presumably Edgar Crook, MP, indulging his whims as a guest of the count. The pictures had a grainy quality, as if they had been taken in poor lighting conditions. Often the view was obscured by table legs or the edges of keyholes, as if they had been taken surreptitiously. Yet the content was clear enough: the politician cavorting with naked servants, both male and female; taking a blonde from behind dressed in a crude copy of a Nazi uniform; tied up and whipped on the floor of one of the bedrooms by a pair of beautiful, boyish servants.

I allowed the folder to fall to the floor and picked out another and another, finding similar contents in each. Clearly, the count had been documenting every sexual encounter in which his guests had indulged. There was enough evidence to turn every one of the count's guests against him and secure their testimony, but how on earth was I going to get it off the estate? I could carry maybe one or two folders away, but which? Following my escape, the count would be sure to spirit all of the photographs away once more. The sound of the door opening brought me out of my thoughts and I spun round...

"I thought that I'd find you here, Miss Blaine."

Estella von Friedrich stood in the entrance to the room, two muscular bodyguards towering behind her, blocking any escape. I backed against the cabinet as she advanced, her eyes flashing with an excitement that was hard to read.

“I finally made it back from London and you found my brother’s little records office, I see,” she said, picking up one of the fallen folders from the floor and examining the contents with a sneer of contempt. She let the pictures of Edgar Crook fall back to the tiles.

“Why?” I asked, stalling for time. “Why does he do it? These people are supposed to be his friends. Allies in the Nazi cause.” I was unable to hide the disgust in my voice on this last note.

Estella shrugged. “He has politicians, doctors, lawyers, police, and even members of your MoD. One week before a Nazi invasion he will release the photos to the press and effectively bring the governing class of this country to its knees. Then Britain will easily roll over for its new German masters ...”

My mind raced desperately. The evidence had to be either taken back to the MoD or destroyed, but I did not see how. The two men began to advance into the room, and I backed away even further, knowing that there was no way that I would escape this time.

“Wait!” she surprised me by holding up a hand. The men froze obediently. “I will deal with her. Leave us.” They looked at one another questioningly. “I said leave! Do you doubt my abilities? She is my prize to take to the count! She is no match for me!”

The men walked out of the room obediently, closing the door behind them. Immediately, Estella fell upon me, but not to attack. She went down on her knees, clutching at my legs and opening the front of my robe...

“At last, my mistress,” she murmured. “I am still yours to command. When you pushed me out of the car, I knew that I had truly found a woman who knew how to dominate me.”

I almost cried out with joy, but controlled myself, remembering that I had to play the domineering mistress for her. I grabbed a handful of her hair and pulled her head back roughly.

“How do I get the evidence out of here?” I demanded, jerking my head toward the filing cabinet. “There’s too much to carry.”

“Feel at the back of the cabinet ...”

I pulled away from her embrace and ran my hand down the back, connecting with a circular metal object held there with tape. Pulling it away I saw that I was holding a tin roughly the size of my palm. I opened it and photographic film no thicker than my little finger spilled out.

“It’s microfilm,” Estella explained, still on her knees. “All the photographic evidence from the cabinet is duplicated there. My brother likes to keep his evidence in many forms. You have pictures in your hands which could bring down a country, Miss Blaine. What will you do with them?”

I looked back at her, triumphant. “I’m going to ruin your brother and everyone in this house. When I’m finished you’re all going to be thrown into the deepest, darkest dungeon Britain has to offer.”

Estella closed her eyes and let out a low moan. “My God, you understand what I like!”

I stepped forward and placed a hand on her neck, holding her firmly. “You will stay here and not alert the house to my escape.”

“Yes, mistress.”

“Get down on your belly.”

“Yes, mistress.”

She prostrated herself before me as I slipped the microfilm into secret compartment in my shoe. I pulled the belt from her coat and used it to tie her wrists securely behind her back. Estella gave a little gasp of pleasure as I pulled the belt tight and stepped over her.

I slipped through the door and out into the deserted corridor beyond, moving along close to the wall and the shadows as I approached the landing and the stairs that led down to the ground floor. All I had to do now was find Bentley and get off the estate. I had everything that we needed to close the case for good. The house seemed silent now, as if the

people I had heard earlier had moved on elsewhere. As I reached the top of the stairs I felt that I had already made it ...

The lights of the hallway came on full, blinding me momentarily with their intensity. I threw my hand up to shield my eyes. As my eyes adjusted to the light, I made out the figure of Count Rufus standing at the bottom of the stairs, his hands on his hips. Before him, stripped to the waist with his hands fastened behind his back, knelt Bentley, his eyes wide and hair awry. He opened his mouth to call out when he saw me, but the count placed a foot on his back and pushed him forward onto his stomach, revealing a network of fresh whip marks across the skin of his back, no doubt from a recent questioning session.

"Bentley!" I cried. Footsteps from behind made me turn, and I saw two of the male servants appear. The standard black shirts worn by the servants of the house had been augmented by the addition of a red armband bearing a black swastika within a white circle. Clearly the count had decided to drop all pretence of respectability.

"The major was unwilling to tell us about your little plan, Miss Blaine," the count called up, placing a boot on Bentley's spine and grinding it in. "Our interrogation methods are very persuasive, but to tell the truth, I think that he enjoyed the whole thing. Wanted to prolong it."

"Let him go!" I cried. "I thought we had an agreement Count Rufus!"

He moved forward, signalling for two more of the servants to take Bentley. They grabbed him roughly by his arms and dragged him, struggling across the floor of the hall into the depths of the house.

"Let her go Rufus!" Bentley bellowed as he went. "It's me you want!"

"Where are you taking him?" I demanded, gripping the banister rail. "We had a deal!"

The count shook his head with mock sadness. "I'm afraid that you reneged on our deal when you decided to start sneaking around my house after dark with your boyfriend. As for

Major Bentley, he'll be taken good care of, which is more than what I can say for you, Miss Blaine."

I began to back away as he advanced up the stairs, flanked by two more of his men. A hand in my back from one of the servants who had appeared behind me stopped my retreat. The count moved up the stairs slowly, savouring the dreadful anticipation of the moment. The softness I had seen in his eyes earlier was all gone now. What I saw in his face was a thousand times more threatening than that of his sister. What I saw was a hard, completely unforgiving intelligence.

"I knew I couldn't trust you, Blaine," he spat, abandoning all niceties now. He reached out to touch my cheek, and I turned my head away. The count smiled and ran his hand down the front of my robe.

"It's going to be fun breaking you. By the time I'm finished, you'll be begging me to touch you."

I met his eyes defiantly. "I don't think so. And I could never be broken by a Nazi."

The count raised an eyebrow. "Really? It's not so difficult you know ..."

As if on cue, footsteps approached across the marble floor of the hall below, and we both looked round. Standing in the centre of the area was a stunning blonde dressed in a figure-hugging black dress, a thin cigarette delicately held between the thumb and forefinger of her right hand. Our eyes met and she regarded me with a cool interest. I recognised her face instantly from pictures that Major Bentley had shown me: Catherine Carlisle!

"So, I finally get to meet my replacement," she said, putting the cigarette to her lips and then blowing a cloud of smoke up toward us.

"You," I said, unable to hide the shock in my voice. "We thought you were dead ... But..."

“I just joined the winning team, dear,” she said with an evil smile. “Besides, the major was getting to be such a bore. And the count is so much more... stimulating. You’ll come to see that in time.”

“Never!” I cried, struggling against the men holding me, almost breaking free. The count removed something from his pocket and advanced toward me.

“Then the rest of your stay at the estate is going to be very difficult for you,” he said as he clamped a folded handkerchief over my mouth. I struggled for a moment and then found my body going limp as the chloroform on the material began to take effect.

Succumbing to the drug, I drifted away again ...

* * * * *

Waking was like swimming from the bottom of the ocean toward the surface. As I opened my eyes, pain split my skull. I was lying on a mattress and the air felt cold, stagnant, as if I was under the ground somewhere. As my vision cleared I made out that I was in some kind of a cell -- stone walls and floor, no sign of a window. There was a single table set in the middle of the room. Leather straps for ankles and wrists were set into the table and the figure of a man lay there, restrained. It was Bentley.

“Major!” I cried. He stirred as I approached, letting out a small groan as he strained against his bonds. He was naked apart from his torn trousers and his face and upper body were marked with bruises and cuts, the evidence of obvious torture. I let out an uncontrollable sob as I stood over him and reached for the strap around his nearer wrist, unfastening it and moving on to the next.

“Miss Blaine?” he said softly, opening his swollen eyes and looking at me. “Thank God you’re okay. You’ve been out like a light. I thought ...”

I ran my fingers lightly over his bruised ribs and he winced, trying to hide the pain. “What have they done to you...”

“Oh, it looks worse than it is,” the major said, closing his eyes. “These fools haven’t got a clue how to break a man. They’ll get nothing from me.”

I eased myself onto the table and lay against him. He clenched his teeth as I rested against him.

“Sorry,” I said.

“It’s okay, it doesn’t hurt.”

“Oh, stop being so bloody brave. It looks like it hurts like hell.”

The major opened his eyes and gave me a smile that faded quickly. “I’m sorry, Miss Blaine. I didn’t know that Catherine was one of them. That they had turned her ...”

I placed my fingers on his lips to silence him. “You couldn’t have known.”

“I just don’t understand ...”

I placed my lips on his to silence him.

After what seemed like an age of holding one another in silence, Bentley spoke. “You have to strap me to the table again.”

I looked round at him, tears flooding my eyes. “No! We can escape together ...”

His hand stroked my cheek gently and his eyes regarded me with a softness that I had not seen before. “No, we can’t. You have to strap me down again, or you’ll be punished as well. And I won’t have that. I’d rather that you did it than one of them.”

“I can’t ...” My voice was lost in sobs. Bentley’s hands came up to my arms, holding me up.

“Now listen to me, Miss Blaine.” His voice took on the commanding tone that I knew so well. “They mean to kill me tomorrow. It will be much harder than they think, believe me. But whatever happens, whatever they tell you, you’ve got to carry on. You’ve got to hold on until I come for you. Do you understand me? You do what you need to do to survive. You’re stronger than all of them, do you hear me?”

The sound of his voice filled me with a strength that I thought I'd lost. I pulled myself off Bentley with some reluctance. My legs were still weak from the chloroform, but I stepped onto the floor and stood tall, so he could see my resolve. I took his right hand in mine, kissed it, and placed it in the wrist restraint once more, securing it there. I moved round the table and did the same with his other hand. Bentley tested the bonds and nodded in approval at their tightness. Tears welled in my eyes once more at his bravery. I fought the tears back, unwilling to give our captors the benefit.

"Good work," he said.

"I love you, Major," I whispered as the door was thrown open behind us, bringing our moment to an abrupt end. Two of the count's men entered, grabbing my arm roughly and dragging me out of the cell.

I had guessed correctly that we were under the house, for a set of stone steps led up to the servants' quarters. I struggled against my faceless captors, casting a look back into the basement.

"Where are you taking me?" I demanded. There was no response.

Chapter Ten

“Come!” a voice shouted brusquely from the other side of the door before which I had been brought.

Hours passed during which time I had been placed in another cell, isolated from Bentley to await my fate. Gradually I began to lose track of time to the point where I no longer knew whether it was night or day. When two of the guards appeared without warning and dragged me back up through the house, I was surprised to see that it was broad daylight outside, perhaps around midday.

One of the men pushed the door open, revealing a plush bedroom within. Catherine Carlisle sat in a high-backed leather chair, flanked by two of the black-shirted heavies who obviously enforced her will around the estate. One of the count’s servants pushed me into the room, closing the door. I walked into the centre of the floor and stood before the woman.

“I wanted to see you once more before you’re questioned fully by Colonel Kremp,” she said, her eyes casting over me critically. “I wonder what Bentley saw in you. I hear that you’re really just a shopgirl playing at being a spy. He must really have lost his senses after I left him.”

I drew myself up a little straighter and looked down at her. "He knows exactly what you are now. You have no power over him."

Carlisle stood abruptly, her fists clenched. I smiled at her as she raised her hand to strike me and then lowered it.

"You still love him," I said quietly. "It doesn't have to be like this ..."

She laughed. "Don't be so obvious, Miss Blaine. I'm not coming back to the good guys."

"I promise you'll regret that when I get out of here..."

"But you're never going to get out of here, are you, my dear?" she whispered maliciously. "Your poor major will spend his last moments filled with guilt over how he sacrificed me for the mission. Abandoned me. And now you as well ..."

"Just how difficult was it to turn you, Catherine? Tell me that the count drugged you, tortured you. You can get out of here with me ..."

Carlisle shook her head. "You really haven't got a clue, have you? Actually, it was I who turned the count."

"Rubbish."

"Oh, it's true. When I was sent here two years ago, he was just another upper class do-gooder, trying to appease the Germans and avoid a war with his little diplomatic missions to Germany and weekends in the country for visiting envoys. Major Bentley had already convinced the MoD that he was a full-blown Nazi and was starting a witch-hunt. I got close to some of the visiting German diplomats ... Let's just say, they convinced me of the benefits of being on their side when they inevitably invade this country. I merely passed on the message to the this should be capitalized and his sister. Given their sexual proclivities it was easy enough. The British establishment is just so bloody repressed, don't you think? Whereas the Nazis have a natural understanding that those who would rule a country should be above the moral restraints of the lower classes."

"You're insane," I said quietly, giving up any thought that I might be able to turn her back to England's cause.

"We'll see who's insane when the panzers are rolling up Whitehall, darling. Perhaps I'll keep the major alive to see the new order and make him one of my personal servants."

I strained forward and did something that I would never have thought myself capable, were it not for the extreme circumstances: I spat at my persecutor. My saliva hit her full in the face. She recoiled in surprise for just a second before wiping the liquid away with the tips of her fingers and touching them to her lips to taste what I had spat at her with a lascivious grin. Her men leapt forward to restrain me.

"Do that again," she invited, breathing heavily. I slumped back against my captors, closing my eyes in defeat, becoming aware of a commotion in the house outside, footsteps running and voices shouting. Catherine nodded to one of her goons, who ran out of the room. He reappeared a moment later.

"The major has escaped," he said urgently. My heart skipped a beat. Catherine strode past me in the direction of the door, nodding for the other man to bring me.

"He won't get far," she said as they dragged me down toward the kitchens. "I want you to be the first to hear about your major's death."

In the courtyard the count's men were massing on horseback, shotguns across their arms, bringing to mind the hunting party of the day before. Yet now my major was being hunted mercilessly, like an animal, across the count's estate.

"He made a break for it when we took him out of his cell," one of the servants was explaining to his master as we approached. The count looked round at me and sneered as he saw me brought into the courtyard.

"Finally we get some real sport around here. Believe me, the major's death won't be as quick as that fox's. And I intend to be there when he finally meets his fate..."

"Sorry to disappoint you, old boy, but the job's already done."

We all looked round as footsteps approached over the cobbles. Judge Lewis, my lascivious dining partner from the night before, was leading his horse by its rein, a shotgun broken across his arm.

"I was out doing some shooting with my man when we happened across the prisoner making for the fence," he explained. "I took the liberty of taking a pot-shot. Rather a clean kill as well, if I do say so myself."

A second figure appeared, the judge's young manservant, leading his own horse. The body of a man, naked from the waist up was draped across the saddle. I recognised the trousers as the tight leather of the chauffeur's uniform Bentley had been wearing. As the horse moved round I saw that the man had been shot in the back of the head, the exit wound disfiguring the face beyond recognition. My legs went weak, and I would have sunk to the floor were I not being held up.

"Made rather a mess of his head," the count protested as he grabbed the corpse's head roughly by the hair and held it up.

"I didn't think you wanted to mount him on your wall!" the judge replied indignantly.

The count nodded, clearly unsatisfied at having missed his chance to kill the major himself, but smiled at the judge. "Good work, Lewis. How can I repay you for your service?"

The judge thought for a moment before his eyes cast over me. "I hear you're putting that one to work for you. I'd like first crack, if that's okay with you."

The count laughed and clapped his friend on his back. I broke free of my captor and flew at the judge, striking him across the face. He recoiled as I was dragged away.

"She's a feisty one alright," he said, clutching his cheek.

I heard a screaming sound in the air and realised that it was the sound of my own voice as I looked at Bentley's body draped over the horse.

"For God's sake, get her downstairs before she wakes the guests," Catherine said. I collapsed into the arms of the man holding me back...

* * * * *

They took me back to the cell, using more chloroform to subdue me. I felt sick from it all. After some time, I do not know how long, more of the servants came to the cell to half carry me back up to the house. Catherine Carlisle was waiting on the stairs as they brought me up.

“She looks terrible,” she said with a sniff. “But the judge won’t mind much, knowing his tastes. Take her to his room.”

I was led up from below the house and across the hall. The dining room doors were open and I made out the interior packed with guests, the count holding court at the head of the table with Colonel Kremp at his side. A ripple of applause went around the congregation and presently the host held up a hand for silence.

“My friends,” the count intoned, his voice booming through the hall, “it seems that every year our group gets larger and stronger than I could ever have imagined. I see around me the future rulers of this country ...” Another round of applause. “ ... Our days of waiting and hiding will soon be at an end. Then the hard business of government and persuading the British people that National Socialism is the best and only way will begin. For now let us revel in the freedom of this house and what it represents. And also to welcome our distinguished guest from Berlin, Colonel Kremp -- ”

The crowd erupted in cheering once more as the colonel stood to attention and raised his right hand in the unmistakable Nazi salute.

“Heil Hitler!” he screeched. The assembled guests raised their arms in simultaneous response and repeated his chant, their voices a single, terrifying entity.

My vision swam as I was dragged away in the direction of the stairs. I was taken into one of the guest bedrooms and deposited in a chair, still half-conscious. A door closed behind me and a figure advanced, running a hand gently over my forehead.

“She’s barely with us,” a voice said. “Get the smelling salts, Danny.”

Presently, one of the men waved under my nose a bottle filled with something that smelled both sharp and foul. It stirred me from my stupor. My vision cleared and I found myself staring into the face of Judge Lewis, the man who had killed Bentley. I recalled the deal he had made with the count and saw his manservant hovering at the ready behind him. I recoiled in my seat. Was this to be my fate? Raped by the man who had killed my one true love? I cast my eyes around the room for some weapon. I would die before I let him have me.

As if reading my thoughts, the judge backed away quickly, his hands raised.

“Easy, Miss Blaine,” he said, handing the smelling salts back to his young servant, who I registered was naked apart from a towel wrapped around his waist. “This isn’t what you think.”

“You killed him, you... bastard.”

The judge shook his head and took a seat opposite me. “I’m a friend of Bentley’s,” he whispered as if afraid that we were being overheard.

“You killed him... I saw him... Now you mean to have me...”

The servant was standing in the bathroom door. He and the judge exchanged a look and both burst into laughter. I looked between them, angry at their mockery.

“I’m sorry, Miss Blaine, but you’re not really my type,” the judge said as the servant joined him at his chair, sitting beside him. The judge placed his arm around the young man’s shoulders. “I find it useful to play the lecherous fool around the women of the count’s estate. All part of the ruse.”

“The ruse?” My head spun with confusion.

“Bentley and I are old school friends,” he explained. “I befriended the count a couple of years back, before I knew of his Nazi sympathies. I was the one who put Bentley on to him in the first place.”

“But the body...”

The judge and his lover exchanged a quick look. "One of the count's men who was pursuing Bentley. We got to him first. Blew his head off and swapped his clothes with the major. He hasn't been missed yet, but it's only a matter of time, I'm afraid."

I frowned, putting things together. "Then Bentley is..."

"Safe and well," the judge finished for me. "Danny here picked him up and took him to one of the MoD safe houses in the area after all the ruckus died down."

My heart soared. I clasped my hands together and held back a tear. "Oh, thank God."

The younger man rose from the chair and disappeared into the bathroom quickly. The judge leant forward after he allowed the news to sink in for a moment, suddenly very serious. "Now listen up. I'm getting you out of here, Miss Blaine. This place is going to be very dangerous for all of us if the count works out our little deception. It seems to be very dangerous for you already. Goodness knows what the count and that bloody traitorous bitch have planned for you ..."

"Harry, we have to move," his lover interrupted, reappearing fully dressed now. The judge nodded and looked back at me.

"Bentley's waiting for you at the edge of the estate," he explained. "Danny will get you out of the house, and we'll try to cover here for as long as possible. When the count finds out that you're not in this room being rogered senseless, all hell is going to break loose."

Chapter Eleven

Dusk was falling as Danny led me unseen out of the servant's entrance and across the courtyard. They had dressed me in a man's coat and placed a hunting cap on my head so that I might have passed for one of the count's guests from a distance. Maybe. Luckily we had not been challenged by any of the servants as we hurried through the kitchens.

"Head in that direction through the woods," Danny explained. "You'll come to a wall that marks the edge of the estate. Walk around until you come to the main gate. The major will be waiting for you."

I looked back at the house and placed a kiss on his cheek. "Thank you. Thank you both."

He smiled. "Just get that evidence back to London or none of us will be safe. Even the judge."

I nodded and turned into the woods, moving carefully between the trees, not looking back. Darkness was falling quickly and the going was difficult, the terrain a mass of low-lying branches and bracken. It must have been a good half hour before I finally reached the imposing brick wall that I had been told about. I looked left and right, suddenly wondering which direction the gate was. A sound from the trees to my left alerted me too late that

someone was approaching. Before I could react, my arms were pinned at my side and I felt the hot breath of a man on my neck, an unshaven chin brushing against my skin.

"Looks like I've found myself a little spy," a thick, countrified voice gloated at my ear. I twisted my head to see the dirty face of some kind of gamekeeper leering at me, licking his lips as if in anticipation of some tasty meal. "But I'll have some fun with you before I hand you back to the master..."

I writhed to free myself from his grasp, but he held me firm with a laugh that made my heart sink. Caught by a common grounds man after all I had been through...

"Let her go, you swine."

Both the gamekeeper and I turned at the sound of the deep, commanding voice from the trees surrounding us. A muscular figure appeared in the moonlight, dressed in country tweeds and a cap, looking for all the world like a gentleman on a weekend hunting party. The gun he aimed at the head of my captor was not a shotgun, however, but an MoD-issue revolver.

"Major Bentley!" I cried, meeting his eyes.

The man's grip on my shoulders fell away and I ran into Bentley's arms, falling against his broad chest and closing my eyes. For the first time since entering the Estella von Friedrich's car, I felt safe. Bentley held me for a moment, then stepped forward and cracked the butt of his weapon across the forehead of the man, who fell like a sack of potatoes.

"Let's get out of here," Bentley said, looking at the lights of the house through the trees. The sound of raised voices began to carry through the night air, unmistakably that of a search party. "Looks like the judge's ruse didn't hold up for very long."

He pulled me to him and our lips found one another's for the briefest, most incredible second. Too quickly he pulled away and led me into the night. We seemed to be running for an age before we made the gates that marked the edge of the count's estate. At one point the sound of our pursuers grew frighteningly near and a bullet screamed past our heads. Bentley

returned fire calmly, three sharp shots from his pistol that silenced whoever was following us for good. At last, we made it to the car that he had parked, half-concealed in the bushes by the side of the road.

“Get in the back and lie down,” he commanded, and I did as he said, too exhausted to protest that I wanted to sit up front so that I was not separated from him for another second. The leather of the back seat was cool and soft as I pressed myself against it. I watched the back of Bentley’s head as he guided the car into the darkness, gunning the accelerator and picking up speed as something hit the windshield and smashed it. He pounded his hand against the shattered glass and pushed it outward as the vehicle swerved to stay on the road.

“Stay down, Miss Blaine!” he ordered as another bullet ricocheted off the side of the car. Behind us, tyres screeched against the road and headlights from a pursuit vehicle illuminated the interior. The back window exploded as a bullet tore through the car, showering me with glass that I frantically brushed away onto the floor.

“Dammit!” Bentley cursed, fumbling to produce his gun as he wrestled with the steering wheel. I rose from the seat and leant into the front, reaching for his weapon.

“For goodness sake, Major,” I cried, “give me the gun!”

He looked at me for a moment in the rearview mirror, but finally handed me the pistol. It felt surprisingly heavy in my hand as I turned back to the open window and the glaring headlights of the car following us.

“Just don’t shoot yourself or me!” Bentley called out. I narrowed my eyes and aimed into the light, determined to show him exactly what Agatha Blaine was made of. The gun jerked violently in my hand as I fired it the first time, sending a jolt up my arm and into the shoulder that almost dislodged it from my grasp. The bullet hit the engine of the car following and the headlights swerved left and right. Encouraged, I fired twice more in quick succession, this time holding the gun more firmly in preparation for the kick. Glass shattered and the car tyres screeched as they skidded across the tarmac surface of the road. The

headlights of our pursuers spun into the night and disappeared into the trees as they ran off the road.

Dropping the smoking-hot gun onto the seat I turned back to my driver, triumphant.

"My God!" he said, slightly hushed. "Good shooting! Where did you learn that?"

I leant over the front seat and looked at him. "I've learnt a lot of things these past two weeks, Major Bentley. You might be surprised."

"I think I might. Damn! Do you smell that? We're leaking fuel. One of those bullets must have hit the tank. Looks like we're not going to make London tonight."

We drove on for another ten minutes, and I outlined what had happened to me since our last meeting. After several miles Bentley pulled the car off the road and down a narrow driveway toward a cottage concealed from the road.

"This is a safe-house we set up when we began surveillance on the count," Bentley explained as he pulled the car up at the door. "We'll stay here until dawn and then find some alternative transport. Get out. Wait for me out of sight while I pull the car into some cover. I'll only be a moment."

I got out and slipped into the shadows, as I had seen him do. At the edge of the lawn, I heard the bushes rustle and give way to the car's advance before Bentley cut the engine. Like the phantom he was, Bentley materialised from the shadows once more. His hand was on my arm before I was even aware he stood beside me.

"Let's go," he said.

The interior of the cottage was quaintly rustic and decorated simply, well kept by a local housekeeper for occasions just such as this, the major explained as he led me up the stairs to the bathroom. He turned on the taps, filling the tub for a steaming hot bath that reminded me that I was filthy from my escape from the house. I wanted more than anything to reach out and embrace him, but was suddenly aware of the mud and grime clinging to my

body. Bentley seemed to read my thoughts as he turned and saw me standing in the doorway, self-consciously holding my arms across my chest.

“It’s okay,” he said softly as he approached, gently parting my coat and pushing it off my shoulders. His hands traced down over my breasts. He appeared mesmerised as he slipped my knickers over my hips and allowed them to fall around my ankles. I turned a little as he ran his hands lightly over the skin of my back,.

Bentley’s attention returned to the bath. He turned off the taps as the water lapped the edge of the tub, and turned back to me. His strong arms enclosed and lifted me, carrying me over to the edge of the bath and laying me gently down. The water was deliciously warm as it lapped around my body, washing away the grime of my escape. I slid under the water to douse my hair and came back up again, leaning back against the bath, allowing the cleansing water to caress me.

Bentley knelt by the side of the tub, ignoring the water that spilled over and onto the tiles, reaching for a sponge that he dampened and squeezed over my bared neck.

“That’s divine,” I whispered as he began to move the sponge over me, cleaning away the evidence of my flight from the house. My nipples were already erect from the stimulation of his touch and I arched my back to meet his hand as it passed over my chest. My eyes met the major’s and I could see an arousal there that almost frightened me with its intensity. I wanted to grab him and pull him into the tub with me, but restrained myself, closing my hand over his instead.

“Is this the final stage of my training, Major?” I gasped, barely able to control my groans as his hands played gently over aching muscles and sensitive bruises. But I realised that I had said the wrong thing. His expression darkened and his grip on the sponge loosened.

“I almost lost you, Miss Blaine,” he said quietly. “Just like ...”

“Major Bentley, there’s something you should see,” I said, looking in the direction of my discarded shoe. “Look inside the heel. There’s a strip of film.”

Bentley reached for the shoe and found the tin, opening it expertly and holding the film up to the light. I explained about the count’s secret files for blackmailing his influential guests, and how everything was recorded on the microfilm in his hands.

“My God!” he exclaimed. “This is what we’ve been looking for! All the evidence Rufus has been keeping on his so-called friends. Everything we need to bring those Nazis to book. The count’s connections in the government won’t be able to save him this time!”

“I’ve also got pictures of the count having a little reunion with Colonel Kremp on that dinky camera you gave me,” I added. “We can get them developed when we get back to London.”

I splashed a handful of water over my face. I closed my eyes and slid under the surface of the water once more, feeling its embrace. Bentley was standing over me when I came up again. He removed the jacket from his shoulders and threw it across the chair in the corner of the room. I lay my head back and watched as he slowly began to unbutton his shirt, revealing a network of bruises along his ribcage. He dropped the shirt on the chair and reached down for the sponge, passing it across his abused flesh carefully. I looked on, watching rivulets of water running over the well-defined muscles of his stomach. I couldn’t resist leaning over the side of the tub and running my fingers over his taut skin. He flinched a little at my touch, either from the sensitivity of his bruised flesh or from the excitement of the contact, I did not know. As I started to pull away, however, he caught my hand in his and pressed it against the front of his trousers. I could feel the hardness of his cock through the material. My fingers found the buttons of his flies and tore them open eagerly, allowing his trousers to fall around his legs. With a swift motion, Bentley removed his pants, standing proud and naked before me. He reached into the water and grabbed me firmly, lifting and carrying me from the bath. Our lips came together in a deep kiss as he carried me across the landing toward the bed where he lay me down.

The major gave me a smile that faded quickly as he lay on the bed beside me. "I'm sorry, Miss Blaine. I didn't know that Catherine was one of them. That they had turned her ..."

I placed my fingers on his lips to silence him. "You couldn't have known."

"I just don't understand ..."

I placed my lips on his. The kiss, so long delayed, sent a thrill of pleasure through my body. I felt Bentley's arms come round to hold me gingerly, as if the lightest touch was a painful event -- but gradually pulling me closer as if desperate for the contact. I pressed myself to his side, moving against the firmness of his body as our kiss went deeper, tongues finding and entwining with one another.

"I was supposed to be looking after you," Bentley said softly as we broke. I silenced him with another kiss, lighter this time as I moved on to brush my lips against his neck. I kissed down his chest, moving tenderly over his own bruised skin. Bentley's body stiffened at the contact, but the hand that stroked through my hair encouraged me not to stop. My hand went lower. His cock -- this first time I that had touched him -- was incredibly hard, clearly still in perfect working order as my kisses traced over his firm stomach toward it.

"I'm sorry, Miss Blaine," he said softly. "I'm not in very good condition ..."

"It's okay," I replied, looking up at him as I stroked my hand over his shaft, which quivered in anticipation. "I'll take charge."

A smile of approval played across Bentley's lips, and he nodded his assent. "You were my best student ..."

I silenced him -- his words anyway -- by placing my mouth on the head of his penis, taking it between the my lips and rolling my tongue around the seam of his glans. Bentley let out a groan of pleasure, body tensed at the sensation as I took him deeper into my mouth, bringing my hand up to stroke and lubricate his shaft. His breath quickened, and under my other hand his balls pulled closer to his body. I could feel him racing toward orgasm, so I

withdrew, holding his cock firmly in my fist, in control now. He looked down at me, his face a map of the abuse inflicted on him at the hands of the count. But I did not think that he had ever looked so handsome to me before.

Straddling him, I took his hand and placed it on my sex against his fingers so that he could feel the wetness there. Bentley's eyes closed as he touched me. With an uncontrollable little cry of pleasure I lowered myself, allowing his cock to part my lips and slide inside. Slowly, ever so slowly, I lowered myself down his length, savouring every inch of his hardness as he entered.

Taking him in to the hilt, I began to rock back and forth, increasing in speed as I felt my own pleasure rising in uncontrollable surges from my thighs, the sensation fluttering through my womb. Bentley matched my excitement, his hips grinding up to meet me in perfect unison as we moved together as one. I bent forward slightly, increasing the friction of his nest of hair against my clitoris. His hands came up to stroke and caress me, and my groaned pleasure matched his. Bentley's eyes met mine appraisingly.

"Not yet," he said. Still he watched my eyes. Searching. Waiting. Then, "Now," he grunted. And he was shooting hard inside me for what seemed like forever. His hands came round to grasp my buttocks, rocking me faster on his cock as I rose to my own orgasm. One finger slid between my cheeks to find my anus. His other hand slipped down to find my clit. A hard tap on both, and I threw my head back, coming with a cry that I did nothing to disguise.

Spent, I fell forward, lying across Bentley's body and stroking my hands gently up his side, still impaled upon him. I buried my face in his neck as his hands came round to stroke my back and run through my hair. We lay there like that for the longest time, before sleep overcame us both.

Chapter Twelve

“Miss Blaine, wake up.” I opened my eyes groggily, momentarily disoriented as I looked around the darkened bedroom, imagining for a second that I was back in the count’s cells. With a sigh of relief I realised that I was in the safe-house. It was Bentley shaking me into wakefulness and not one of the count’s guards.

“We have to get out of here now.”

I pulled myself up onto my elbows, seeing that Bentley was already dressed and holding a shotgun in his left hand. Without a question I rose from the bed. Bentley tossed me a clean dress from the well-stocked wardrobe as I pulled on the fresh underwear already laid out on the bed. I became aware of the unmistakeable sound of movement outside the house and looked at the major, who nodded to me.

“They found us a little quicker than I anticipated, I’m afraid. I shouldn’t have fallen asleep ...”

I pulled the dress over my head and moved quickly to his side. “What are we going to do?”

A voice shouting from outside interrupted any answer that he intended to give.

“Major Bentley! Miss Blaine!” The voice had a thick German accent, unmistakeable. “We have you surrounded! There is no one for miles and no escape. Do the sensible thing and surrender. Otherwise we will have to burn your house down with you in it ...”

I pressed myself against Bentley, who placed his free arm around me and gave me a smile.

“If they want a fire, I’ll give them one,” he whispered as he led me toward the door. We moved quickly down the stairs and through to the kitchen, keeping low and away from the windows. Bentley moved to the cellar and produced a large petrol can which he handed to me.

“Pour this around in the living room,” he said, scanning the garden through the kitchen window. “I’m going to give them something to think about.”

I moved back through to the other room and began pouring the petrol over the settee, the table, the chairs – everything. The major moved close to the window. He watched as I emptied the last of the petrol and motioned for me to move back to the kitchen, where I waited at the door. Satisfied that I was at a safe distance, Bentley drew back the curtain swiftly and brought the shotgun round, smashing the barrel through the nearest pane of glass and taking aim at a car parked directly in front of the house. He fired both barrels at the petrol tank and the vehicle exploded in flames, rolling away from the house. In the suddenly illuminated night I could see at least two men fleeing from the fireball as Bentley ran toward me across the room, producing a Zippo lighter from his pocket as he did so.

“Out the back door!” he commanded as he struck the lighter and threw it at the table, igniting the petrol. The living room went up in flames as we ran through the kitchen and out into the night air. Bentley grabbed my hand, pulling me on faster as we ran across the small back garden toward the low wall and open fields beyond. Without warning the figure of a large man stepped from behind one of the trees near the house, blocking our escape, a pistol in his hand. I had enough time to recognise the leather trench coat as one of those worn by the men I had seen with Colonel Kremp. Bentley raised the butt of the empty shotgun and

smashed it into his face. The man fell backward and we kept on running, the empty shotgun discarded near the fallen German.

Beyond the garden we were running through open fields and rough terrain, making the going slower. I looked back swiftly and saw the safe house going up in flames, the thatched roof igniting like a tinderbox.

“Don’t look back!” Bentley said urgently, sensing that I had slowed for a second. As if to prove his point, the crack of a gun sounded in the distance behind. I slipped on the uneven ground and the major caught my arm before I fell, helping me on. We hit a shallow stream and splashed through the water to the other side, reaching the comparative cover of a row of trees where Bentley brought us to a halt for a moment. From his pocket he produced his pistol, opening the chamber to reveal only three bullets. His eyes met mine.

“I’m staying here, Miss Blaine,” he whispered. “You go on and I’ll take care of these Nazi blighters.”

I placed my hand on the gun, lowering it. “If you stay, I stay, Major Bentley. There’s no way I’m leaving you.”

He studied me for a moment, as if about to argue, but clearly saw that it would be no use. Across the field I made out the silhouette of one of our pursuers and nudged Bentley. He snapped the chamber of the pistol closed and squeezed off a shot. The shape in the field dropped to the ground and the major sent another round flying in the general direction, saving the final bullet.

“Come on,” he said, motioning for us to keep moving. “For all they know we’ve got enough ammo to keep on like that all night.”

We moved through the trees and out into the field on the other side. The cold was already starting to bite through the jumper that I had hastily thrown over my shoulders, but I hid my shivers. Beside me, Bentley strode on resolutely, looking back occasionally for signs of our pursuers.

* * * * *

Two hours later the sun began to rise over the Peak District and with it an early morning mist began to descend over the low-lying areas between the hills. It made the going more difficult and slow – although it hid our movements from any pursuer. Bentley looked round at me from time to time, checking that I was okay but not slowing his pace. For my part, the dampness from the ground had long since soaked through my shoes and the mist clung like a cold shroud around my body.

“Take this,” Bentley said, placing his jacket around my shoulders. I looked sceptically at the thin shirt he was wearing but he shook his head. “That’s an order.”

We came to a dry stone wall and he helped me clamber over into the next field. Visibility was down to a few hundred feet in the mist, but Bentley seemed resolute in the direction we were travelling. So far we had seen no sign of a village or even a house, however.

“How much further, do you think?” I asked.

“Bakewell is in this direction,” he replied as he came over the wall beside me. “We should make it in the next half hour. All we have to do is find a telephone, and I’ll bring half the army down here to help us.”

I smiled at him, reassured by the idea. “Do you think they’re still following? Maybe they lost us.”

“Don’t bank on it,” he said. “Kremp and his men are experts, skilled in tracking escaped prisoners. They won’t give up until they have us. Think you can make it?”

I smiled at him and he reached out to take my hand as we walked on. “We’re almost home, Miss Blaine.”

We carried on in silence for a while, and I began to get the sense of some kind of tension hanging in the air -- on top of the fact that we were being pursued by three Nazi assassins, of course. I looked over at Bentley and could almost see the question on his face.

“Catherine Carlisle,” I said for him and a look of relief spread across his features as the subject was broached. “What would you like to know, Major?”

He looked away for a moment, into the swirling mists.

“I brought you into this mess to try to save the woman, Miss Blaine,” he said bitterly. “I can only apologise from the bottom of my heart.”

“You weren’t to know that she was a traitor,” I said. “It seems that she had everybody fooled.”

He nodded, but I sensed the mix of emotions coursing through him. How long had he been mourning her death? And how long before that had she been feeding the MoD false information about the count and his activities? I squeezed Bentley’s hand in reassurance.

“She’s a master of manipulation,” I suggested. But Bentley shook his head.

“No, the count must have brainwashed her somehow...”

I stopped walking and the major stopped as well, turning to look at me. I reached up and stroked a hand down his cheek.

“She was the one who turned him, Major Bentley. She told me so herself.” He was already shaking his head in disbelief, but I pressed the point home anyway. “The Nazis recruited her directly and she turned the count.”

Bentley released my hand and turned away, staring into the shifting whiteness. For a moment I thought he might stride away into the mist, but finally he turned back to me, his expression softening.

“I’ve been a fool.”

I moved toward him and placed my arms around his shoulders. “You were in love. It has been known to make people blind.”

“Not anymore.” He bent down and kissed me, and for a wonderful moment I was lost in his embrace. When he finally pulled away his hand found mine and we walked on, the tension cleared. I knew that it would be a long time before he truly got over the memory of

Catherine's lies and the embarrassment of having been taken in by her. Such knowledge was difficult for a man such as Bentley to accept, I understood. Catching the woman and the count and having them tried as traitors would be a start toward the healing. After that, I would take every day as it came. For the moment I was happy just to have him by my side, even if we were still in mortal danger.

"Look!" I cried as we walked on. In the mist I had made out the shape of a building. Bentley saw it too and squeezed my hand, pulling me on faster across the field. The mist cleared as we approached and my heart leapt as the unmistakable shape of a platform and a railway line came into view. We had made it! I just hoped that a train was coming through sometime soon.

The Bakewell station stood at the edge of the town and only a few early morning commuters waited on the platform as we approached. Bentley made directly for the ticket office, pointing me in the direction of the women's toilets.

"You go freshen up, Miss Blaine," he said. "I'm going to get us tickets for the next train and make a couple of calls."

I looked over his dishevelled clothes. "Think you'll be able to convince them you're a major?"

Bentley stood a little taller and nodded. I didn't doubt him for a second. His authority was about more than just a uniform.

The interior of the bathroom seemed deliciously warm after the chilling, misty air. I walked to the nearest sink and ran the hot tap, letting steaming hot water pour into the bowl, running my icy hands under it to revive myself. I caught sight of my face in the mirror, dirt-smeared and harried, and ran a hand through my hair. I thought of my little flat in Soho and wondered how long it would be until I saw it again. It seemed a million miles away at that moment.

I emerged onto the platform a few minutes later, having freshened myself as much as possible, seeing that the mist was slowly lifting and that more people had appeared. Clearly a train was imminent. Thank goodness. Bentley approached from the ticket office, two tickets clutched in his hand.

“Something’s wrong,” he said and my hopes sank a little. “The telephone isn’t working in the ticket office. Line’s been cut, I’d wager. Kremp isn’t stupid, must have worked out that we were headed in this direction and decided to set a trap. I should have been more careful.”

I looked up and down the platform, seeing only sleepy-looking faces awaiting the next train. “Should we run for it? Go to the village?”

Bentley shook his head. “If they’ve got us surrounded we’ll be dead the moment we step off the platform away. It’s too crowded at the moment for them to do anything. Kremp is more discreet than that. He probably wants us to get on the London train and try to take care of us quietly during the trip.”

As the sound of a train approaching along the tracks came to my ears I made out a man at the far end of the platform, the leather trench coat easy to recognise. I looked round and saw a similar figure appear at the other end, eyes locked on us. Bentley reached to his pocket, pulling out the handle of the gun that he had concealed there, sending them a message. They weren’t going to take us without a fight.

The train pulled up, billowing smoke and steam as people began to pile into the carriages. Bentley moved to the nearest and opened the door.

“Is this a good idea?” I asked, hesitating. “Once we’re on there...”

“Come on!” he said, taking my arm and pushing me inside. “We won’t last long out in the open.”

The compartment was deserted and seemed warm after the coolness of the platform. Bentley motioned for us to move to another and we walked out into the corridor which ran the length of the carriage. Two compartments down, a pair of vicars were seated, wrapped in

jackets that I envied as we entered. Bentley took a seat beside me and leant over to whisper in my ear as the train began to pull away.

“Stay here. You’ll be safe as long as you’re not alone. I’m going to scout out the rest of the train. Take the initiative...” I placed a restraining hand on his arm and he squeezed it to reassure me. “I’ll be back.”

I looked round at my companions as he closed the compartment door behind himself. The younger of the two vicars, a thin-faced man in his early twenties, smiled at me shyly and then stuck his face in a book. The older, a red-faced man who for all the world seemed to be suffering from the effects of too much alcohol, even at that time of the morning, fell into a deep sleep five minutes out of the station, his snores echoing through the carriage.

The train travelled south through the peaks toward Matlock, passing cliffs and crags and the more gently rolling features of the Peak District. I tried to focus on the view while at the same time watching the door, anxious for Bentley’s return. After some fifteen minutes, footsteps approached along the corridor and I stirred in my seat. The figure that appeared at the door was one of the trench-coated men from the platform.

I sank back in my chair as he slowly opened the compartment and stepped inside, casting his cold, blue eyes around the interior. My hand reached for the handle of the exterior door. Could I jump out? One look at the speeding, uneven ground at the side of the tracks stayed any such thought.

The German smiled as I withdrew my hand and he took a seat on the same bench that I occupied, nodding to the younger vicar as he did so.

“Good morning,” he said. His accent was perfect English. I wondered for a moment if he was really one of them, but then I caught him studying me from the corner of his eye. He sensed my gaze on him and met my eyes, a cruel smile tracing across his lips. “Good morning, miss.”

I made no response, keeping my eyes on him as one would a dangerous animal in a confined space. What did it mean? Had Bentley been captured? Killed? I pushed such thoughts from my mind. For the moment I had to work out what to do next.

“Excuse me,” I asked the younger vicar, “how far to the next stop?”

The young man jumped a little as if surprised that I had spoken to him. “Oh, Matlock Bath. We should be there in about five minutes. Then the train runs express to London.”

I nodded thanks to him and sat back, my mind racing. One thing was certain: the next station was my last chance to get off the train before the long trip to the capital. To my dismay, as the train approached Matlock, the young vicar put away his book and started fussing with the pair’s luggage. Clearly they were intending to get off, which would leave me alone in the compartment with the German. There was no choice. I had to get off with them.

As the station approached, however, the other man made his move, shifting closer to me on the seat. I looked down and saw the glint of a blade in his hand which he concealed again quickly. Bending close to me he whispered, “Try to get out and I’ll gut those priests before they reach the door.”

I looked across the compartment as the young vicar helped his companion to his feet. The train ground to a halt, and they struggled out of the compartment. The German kept his eyes locked on me, ready to strike at the slightest movement. An elderly couple appeared at the compartment door.

“My wife’s not feeling well,” the German said apologetically in his perfectly accented English. “Would you mind finding another compartment?”

The old man smiled and closed the door, leaving me alone with my captor. He stood and drew the curtains on the corridor windows as the train began to pull away once more. He removed the knife from his pocket now that we were alone.

“Don’t try anything stupid, Miss Blaine,” he said, abandoning the fake accent as he saw me eyeing the exterior door. “I could kill you ten times before you even touched the handle.”

I sank back in my seat, but he moved across the compartment and placed the lock on the exterior door nevertheless.

"Where's Major Bentley?" I demanded as he turned his back to the door and weighed the knife in his hand.

"Shot, I'm afraid," he replied. "He fell off the train ten miles back."

My blood ran cold and I looked away, hoping against hope that the man was lying, trying to break my spirit.

"Now, I want the microfilm you stole." I met his eyes defiantly and he smiled. "The choice is yours. I'll use the knife to retrieve it, if necessary."

"You'll have to take it from me," I replied, glancing around the carriage, trying to think of some way to fight back.

The German shrugged and made forward.

Glass shattered as Bentley came through the window of the carriage, swinging down from the roof, feet first. He hit the German in the back, knocking him to the floor of the compartment. Before I could even react, the major had pounced on the winded man, trying to pin his arms behind his back. The German twisted like a snake, throwing Bentley back against the door. I drew my foot up and smashed it across our attacker's chin as he turned back to me, blade in hand. The false heel broke at the contact and the microfilm spilled across the floor as the German crashed back to the ground, unconscious.

"There's your microfilm," I said, and gave him a kick in the ribs for good measure.

"Good work," Bentley said as he regained his footing. "Get the curtain cords."

I grabbed the ties from their hooks and tossed them to the major, who set to work binding the German's wrists and ankles. Satisfied, he left him lying on the floor and slumped back against the seat. I flew to his side and threw my arms around his neck. He flinched with pain as I did so. Looking down, I saw a blood stain spreading down the right leg of his trousers.

“You’ve been...”

“Shot, yes,” he said weakly. “Again. I don’t think the bullet hit an artery. That’s good. But I don’t feel --”

Bentley’s eyes rolled up into his head for a moment and I had to support him as he slumped to one side. He came to once more and focused on me with some effort.

“Do what you have to do to keep them out of this compartment...”

With that, his eyes closed from exhaustion and I lay him gently down on the seat. I moved quickly to the interior door to confirm that it was still locked before turning again to check Bentley’s wound. Sure enough, the bullet seemed to have entered the outer flesh of his leg, no doubt lodging in the muscle somewhere for I could see no sign of an exit wound. As soon as we got to London, it would be imperative to get the metal removed, but for the time being I had to improvise. I stripped the leather coat from the German’s body and tore his shirt away. Then I ripped the material up to make a crude bandage for the wound, tying another strip round as a tourniquet above the entry point. The bleeding seemed to be slowing already – I bent again to the man on the floor. At his waist he carried a holstered gun which I removed.

“Miss Blaine.”

I spun round, the gun clutched in my hand at the words, whispered from the other side of the curtained doors.

“I know that you’re in there.”

I recognised the voice and accent as that of Colonel Kremp and moved back against the seat, shielding Bentley.

“If you come in here, your man’s dead,” I replied. Then, for good measure, I added, “I’ll shoot him with his own gun.” I trained the gun at the back of the fallen German and wondered if I could actually pull the trigger if needed. In that instant, I considered Bentley’s vulnerability, and all such doubt vanished.

“Please, Miss Blaine.” The voice was soft and reassuring now. “All we want is the microfilm and our man back. Send him out with what we want, and we’ll jump off the train.”

I aimed the pistol at the curtains where the voice was coming from and cocked it loudly enough for Kremp to hear on the other side. “Get away from the door or I start shooting. The disadvantage is yours.”

There was silence for a moment.

“You’ll never make it out of the station alive, Miss Blaine,” he said at length. “I don’t want to make a scene, but I will if necessary. Think it over.”

With that the voice fell silent, although I sat with the gun trained on the door for another minute. Finally, when Bentley stirred, I turned my attention back to the important job of binding his wound.

Outside, the Derbyshire countryside rattled by ever more quickly, taking us inexorably toward London once more.

Chapter Thirteen

The following hours crawled by as I simultaneously watched over my fitfully sleeping lover and the bound Nazi struggling against the ties on the floor of the compartment. When he came round and started up with a mixture of threats and pleas to be released, I stuffed a wad of material from his jacket into the German's mouth to silence him. Now he looked up at me with blazing eyes as I stroked my fingers through Bentley's hair, the pistol gripped in my other hand.

I looked out through the broken window and saw that the countryside was beginning to give way to rows of houses and factories as we began to pass through the outer suburbs of the city toward St Pancras Station. It seemed like an age since I'd left the city although it had only been a few days. A sudden wave of fatigue spread through my body as I sensed us approaching home. We were not safe yet, however. Although the Colonel had decided to leave the door to the compartment alone, he was sure to be lying in wait along with his other henchman the moment we got off the train.

"Catherine," Bentley moaned at one point, making me start. I ran a hand across his forehead and felt a feverish sweat beginning to form there. Although the tourniquet seemed

to be doing its job, he had lost a lot of blood and his complexion was starting to look deathly pale. "Catherine... why..."

I took his hand in mine and held it in silence. I would have to accept that his nightmares might be about Catherine for a while, just as his dreams had been before.

"Agatha." The sound of my name from his lips actually made me start. I don't think I had yet heard him call me simply by my given name and it sounded a little odd. At the same time, it set my heart fluttering. "Agatha, I'm sorry... I should have..."

His voice trailed away and I stroked a hand through his hair soothingly. "It's okay," I whispered, holding him a little closer. We stayed like that for a long time, with me easing away his fever dreams as best I could. Finally, as we were approaching the city, his eyes fluttered open and gradually focused on me.

"Miss Blaine," Bentley said, reaching up to stroke my cheek. He saw the city passing by outside the window and pushed himself up, wincing in pain as he did so. "How long have I been sleeping?"

"A few hours," I replied, helping him into a sitting position.

"And Kremp?"

I shrugged and held up the pistol. "I convinced him that trying to come in here would be rather bad for his health."

Bentley smiled and nodded in approval. "Then he'll try to stop us in the station. We'll have to move fast. There's a guard post by the ticket office at St Pancras."

I looked at his wound a little sceptically. "Will you be able to make it?"

The major gritted his teeth and pulled himself up a little straighter. "I've been hurt worse than his, believe me, Miss Blaine."

For better or worse, the train thundered on unstopably. Within fifteen minutes we started to slow as it pulled toward the station which serviced London's northern lines. I retrieved my shoes from the floor, seeing that the false heel on the left was irrevocably

broken. I removed the camera from the other, put the microfilm in my pocket, and decided to go barefoot. I just hoped that I didn't have to run too far. As the carriage passed the end of the platform, I helped Bentley to his feet. He gritted his teeth against the pain that seared through his leg and looked round at me with an attempt at a smile. His face was drained of blood. Holding Bentley up, I cast a quick look back at our captive.

"What about him?"

Bentley sniffed, taking the German's confiscated pistol from my hand and holding it close to his body, half-concealed. "We'll leave him here. He'll be picked up later."

The carriage travelled down the platform, slowing inexorably as it went. Porters, luggage racks, and people looking eagerly into the carriages for loved ones passed the window before the compartment finally came to a halt. Bentley reached out, unlocking the door and throwing it open, stepping down onto the platform, good leg first. I followed quickly, taking his arm to support and looking along the length of the train toward the station concourse. People already streamed out of carriages, joining the mass of humanity that crowded the platforms, and although I strained to make out the shape of Kremp or the other German I found it impossible to catch any sight of them.

Holding one another close, we pushed through the sea of bodies, negotiating the piles of cases and other baggage that crowded the platform. A group of school children went running between the commuters and in the distance the station clock chimed the hour, making me look round momentarily.

A figure stepped out of the crowd, brushing past me and barging into Bentley. I had just enough time to see a fist connect with the wound on his thigh. Bentley doubled over in pain, dropping to his knees. The pistol fell from his grasp and skittered to the edge of the platform, disappearing under the train, lost to us. I looked round to see Kremp's henchman take Bentley's arm as he collapsed to the ground.

“My God, someone help!” the man cried loudly, drawing the attention of everyone in the immediate area. “I think he’s having a heart attack!”

People came rushing and someone pushed me backward away from the major. I struggled to get close, but felt a hand close around my upper arm. The cold steel of a blade pressed against my side, and I didn’t have to look round to know that Colonel Kremp was holding me.

“Come with me quietly, Miss Blaine, or the major dies now. I know you have the microfilm. All I want to do is go somewhere quiet where you can hand it over.”

Without another word he started pulling me away from the scene. I allowed him to lead me, finally feeling defeated. For a brief moment I considered screaming out or pulling away, but knew that Kremp would surely be too quick with the knife. If I put him in a corner, who knew what the colonel would do?

“Very good,” he whispered, stale breath on my cheek as we made toward the end of the platform. “Not far now. Then it’s all over.”

The floor felt cold under my bare feet and I prayed that someone would notice something wrong, see the way he was restraining me or the knife against my side. Everyone was running in the opposite direction, however, toward the diversion that the other German had created with Bentley. I was vaguely aware of a train pulling in on the other side of the platform. From the corner of my eye I made out the shapes of uniformed figures in the carriage windows and looked round in amazement to see a military transport train full of soldiers pulling into the station. Kremp tensed at my side and pulled me closer.

“Don’t try anything,” he whispered as the soldiers began to pile onto the platform, shouting, laughing and jostling one another. “Remember that my man has Bentley.” The blade pressed closer against my side and Kremp doubled his pace.

“Hey! You there! Hold up!”

We kept moving, ignoring the voice behind us.

“I said wait!”

Kremp finally stopped at the voice calling in our direction. We turned slowly to see a young officer standing on the platform directly behind us. He was tall and blonde and possessed of a kind of boyish enthusiasm that virtually radiated from his face. He looked at us as if he had just discovered gold on the station platform. There was a terrible moment of silence as I waited for Kremp’s reaction.

“I knew it! It’s Agatha, isn’t it?” A smile of recognition split his face. I met Kremp’s eyes, feeling him loosen his grip a little and remove the blade from my side. I looked back at the soldier, trying to place his face as his companions streamed out of the train behind him.

“You don’t remember me,” he said, a little shyly. “I was in basic training with Johnny. He talked about you non-stop for three whole months. Had your picture above our bunk. We met...”

“At the Dog in Islington,” I finished for him. “When you were both on leave. It’s Tom, right?”

The soldier nodded, stepping forward, and for a moment I thought that he was going to throw his arms around me. Kremp moved a little closer again, reminding me of his presence. A flash of his eyes warned me that we should not delay.

“Well, what a coincidence! I hope Johnny’s done the decent thing and married you by now or I’ll have something to say to him next time our paths cross,” Tom said, looking at Kremp for the first time questioningly. I looked at the Nazi and took a deep breath.

“This is ... my uncle.” Kremp nodded a hello at the soldier and placed a hand on my arm again.

“We really must be going, my dear,” he said softly. “Auntie will be waiting.”

“But surely you have time for a quick cuppa,” Tom interrupted, but Kremp was already starting to pull me away.

“No time, I’m afraid.”

A frown passed across the young man's face, and I saw his eyes glance down to my bare, dirty feet.

"Excuse me for asking, sir," he said, following us as Kremp moved away, "but what's that accent you've got there?"

Kremp froze, his eyes darting around the sea of uniforms and then back to Tom. "Accent? I don't know what you mean."

"Oh, I was a linguistics student before '39. I can't help but detect ... Were you born on the continent?"

Kremp's eyes widened, clearly fazed by the idea that someone might see through the perfection of his clipped English tones.

"What exactly are you suggesting, young man?" Kremp's voice took on an extra edge, the arrogant tone of a disgruntled English aristocrat. "That I am some kind of ..."

The soldier held up his hands, backing off a little. "I didn't mean to offend you, sir."

The corners of Kremp's lips curved upward slightly at regaining the initiative and he began to pull me away again. Tom's eyes met mine, seeming to contain a silent question which I answered with a smile and the slightest shake of the head. *It's all okay. Uncle is just eccentric*, my look told him. He smiled, raising his hand in a regretful wave.

"Very good, Miss Blaine," Kremp hissed as we moved away. "You might just survive this morning after all. Remember that if you want to see your lover again..."

His words were lost to me as I sensed a commotion on the platform behind us. I'd already half turned in the direction where Bentley still lay, expecting the worst. A single voice cut through the hubbub of the platform, bringing Kremp up sharply.

"SIEG HEIL!"

Kremp wheeled round in the direction of the sound, an automatic reaction, his right arm rising as he brought his feet together in a salute. Too late, he checked himself, freezing with his hand outstretched at waist level.

Around us the platform froze, people torn between looking at the man standing beside me in half-Nazi salute and the figure who was standing beside the other train, dragging a luggage trolley behind him. On the trolley the body of the other German was stretched out, unconscious and bleeding from a broken nose. Before it stood Bentley, one trouser leg slick with blood from the wound and his face drained of colour, but standing tall. Kremp's mouth fell open, aware of the eyes on him. Suddenly he sprang into action, grabbing me around the neck and bringing the blade to my throat.

"Drop it!" Tom's voice screamed through the silence as he instinctively brought out his pistol and levelled it at Kremp's head. The German pressed the blade closer and shook his head slowly.

"Don't be a fool, boy. I'll kill her before -- "

The sound of a hundred rifles being primed and aimed in his direction stopped Kremp's words in his throat. We both looked around. It seemed that in every direction on the platform, even from the windows of the train, soldiers were poised, weapons aimed at the Nazi. Our eyes met. I felt him release the blade from my throat slightly.

"Congratulations, Miss Blaine," he said softly, his eyes dead and cold. "It looks as if you're going to make it after all. Don't worry. I'm not going to kill you. It wouldn't give me enough time for this ..."

The blade fell, clattering to the ground at my feet, as Kremp raised his hand to his mouth. His teeth closed over the top of the ring that he wore on his middle finger. He bit down hard. A second later his whole body jerked in a spasm of pain and he crashed back heavily onto the platform. I stepped away, shocked as I watched Kremp go into convulsions, frothing from the mouth and nose. Tom rushed past me, bending over the dying Nazi. I became dizzy, reaching out for some kind of support.

Bentley's hand grabbed mine and I half fell against him, looking up into his eyes.

"Thank God," he said quietly, running his hand through my hair.

“Are you ...”

“I’m fine,” he reassured me. “Sorry I got delayed.”

I smiled and pressed myself against him, aware of the blood soaking his clothing. I had to get him to a hospital as quickly as possible, that was clear. I looked around and saw Tom placing his jacket over Kremp’s head.

“He killed himself ...”

Bentley nodded. “Kremp was too valuable to ever risk being taken alive. Nasty business.”

He slumped a little against me and I cried out for Tom to help. The young officer stepped forward, placing a supportive arm under the major’s.

“We have to get him to a hospital,” I said urgently. Bentley’s eyes snapped open and he shook his head vigorously.

“I need to get to a phone. The evidence has to be taken to General Basingstoke ...”

“Now look here, old chap,” Tom began to protest, “perhaps you should listen to the lady.”

“Sergeant, my name is Major Jack Bentley and I’m giving you a direct order. Get me to a phone this instant if you don’t want to be busted down to private by this afternoon.”

The younger man snapped to attention, delivering a speedy salute before reaching out to hold up Bentley once more. He gave me a worried look and I couldn’t help feeling sorry for him.

“It’s okay, Tom,” I reassured him. “Let him have his telephone call. Then we’re taking him to the hospital. And that really is an order.”

Chapter Fourteen

“You look like you could do with a stiff drink, my dear,” the general said. He walked to the drinks cabinet in the lounge room of his London townhouse without waiting for my response. He was as red-faced as he had been the night that I had first met him at the MoD interview. He also looked a good deal fatter in his civilian clothes, rather than the flattering cut of his uniform. He walked over to where I was sitting and placed a scotch in my hand before taking a seat opposite me.

“So, how’s the patient doing?”

I sighed and shook my head a little. “As well as possible, considering that he refused to stay in the hospital. Sleeping now.”

In the spare bedroom above us Bentley was out cold. An Army doctor on the troop train had patched him up right there in the station, but he had insisted on us being taken to the General’s private residence direct from the station. A call placed to the MoD brought Basingstoke quickly from his office along with a pair of soldiers who stood guard outside the entrance. The clock on the mantel struck seven and I reflected on how long and how far away our flight across the Derbyshire countryside seemed.

“That’s Jack all over,” the General said with a snorting laugh, taking a generous sip of his drink. “Got himself shot on operations in North Africa last year. Wouldn’t even have the wound dressed until he knew that every one of his men was safely back to the command. Of course, he did the smart thing coming straight here.”

I leaned forward a little, casting a glance over the microfilm and camera that were lying on the table beside his seat.

“Does he suspect an insider at the MoD?” I asked, remembering something that the Estella von Friedrich had said. The general smiled.

“Smart girl. Who knows? The count certainly has some friends in high places, as evidenced by that strip of film. That’s why we’ve got to play it very carefully. If we just come out with that evidence, some of the count’s contacts might have it buried and then we’d be right back to square one.”

I frowned at that. “But don’t we have to act quickly? The count is just going to flee the country if he thinks we’re really on to him. We should be sending troops to his estate right now...”

The General held up a hand to silence my protests. “The best thing you can do at the moment is rest, Miss Blaine. Leave it to the professionals. Bentley is in no state to do anything, so I’m taking you both off the case and putting you on indefinite leave. I’m going to handle this one personally.”

He reached over and picked up the microfilm and the camera, placing them in his pocket as he rose from his chair.

“Why don’t you finish your drink and go upstairs. You must be exhausted.”

He was right about that. I could barely keep my eyes open, the exertions of the past few days hitting me hard now that we were out of danger. I took a sip of my drink and the liquid burned down my throat unpleasantly. Single malt was a taste that I hadn’t yet acquired. I set it to one side. The general rose and moved to the door.

“I’ll give you a few minutes to finish your drink, Miss Blaine,” he said. “Just going outside to make sure that the lads aren’t napping.”

As he left I took another look at the drink and decided to leave it. The temptation to close my eyes and drift away right there and then was massive. I stood, walking around the plushly furnished room, casting my eyes over the bookcases and pictures that adorned the wall. Somewhere in the back of my mind I had the strangest feeling that I was looking for something. Nothing had felt right about the day since Bentley had made that telephone call. It should have been a victory, but all I felt was empty. Bentley wounded. The general holding the evidence and moving so cautiously with it ...

I came to a series of framed photographs, pictures of the general several years younger and many stones lighter. He clearly fancied himself an outdoors man for there were images of him fishing and shooting and ... fox-hunting. My blood instantly ran a little colder as I zeroed in on one of the pictures: the general in the midst of a party dressed for the hunt. I scanned the image closer, trying to make out where it had been taken. Several features in the background were reminiscent of the count’s estate. But was I just imagining it?

Could it be ...

Without wasting another second, I decided to trust my instinct, moving quickly to the window and casting a look through the curtains to the street. The two soldiers assigned to protect the door were walking away in the direction of the train station, clearly having been dismissed for the night. I looked to the door and heard Basingstoke’s footsteps approaching on the other side. I moved back to my seat swiftly.

“Well, they seem fine, if a little bored,” he said jovially as he refilled his glass. “Come, come, Miss Blaine. You haven’t even touched your drink.”

I smiled and rose from my chair, making for the door. “As you said, I’m tired. I think I’ll just head to bed.”

The general stepped before me, blocking my escape. "You know, Bentley really does have a gift for spotting talent," he said, looking down at me. "I'm beginning to think that I might want you at the MoD when all this is cleared up ..."

I moved around, trying to circumnavigate his bulk in a bid to get to the door. His hand reached out and stroked my arm. I almost recoiled.

"What do you say? Bentley won't mind. He's a man of the world."

I smiled at him demurely, meeting his eyes and sensing his breathing quickening. "That sounds interesting. Perhaps I could take another look at that microfilm while I'm thinking it over."

The General looked down at his pocket and then back to me, releasing my arm and pushing me away slightly. His face hardened imperceptibly and I could almost see his mind working. He knew.

"Sit down, Miss Blaine."

I did not move for a second, so he pulled a tiny revolver from his jacket, waving it in the direction of my chair.

"Please don't make this any harder than it already is."

I sat reluctantly and he took the seat opposite, keeping the gun trained on me as he drained his glass.

"Bentley trusted you," I said quietly. "You're a traitor."

The general shook his head. "No. I tried to tell Jack to give it up on the count, but he just wouldn't listen. Too many friends in high places, I said. Of course, it was only this morning that the count called me. Said that there was some evidence. Pictures from a party he held..."

"You're on the microfilm," I said, comprehending.

"It was years ago. Before the war, believe me. Turns out he enjoyed secretly photographing his friends long before he turned traitor. But of course if the count is branded

a Nazi, all of his acquaintances will be too. And then there's the nature of the pictures ..." His voice broke a little. "My wife ... my children ... couldn't take the shame."

I looked into his eyes, pleadingly. "It's not too late. We can bring down the count. Keep your involvement secret ..."

The general let out a short laugh and shook his head. "Bentley's too much of a straight shooter for that. And so are you. Always the search for truth. You know what? I admire you both for it as well. But I can't live by it. I'm sorry."

The general looked round as the door to the room opened. I was not the least surprised to see Count Rufus walk in, a look of triumph etched across his face. Catherine Carlisle followed, by her master's side as ever, playing the dutiful mistress, the consummate manipulator. The count walked to the general and took the empty glass and the gun from his hand as one would take something dangerous from a child.

"Fix the general a drink, my dear," he said, handing the glass to Catherine. "He looks like he could use another."

The count cast his eyes over me and stood at the general's side. "How nice to see you again, Miss Blaine. A little sooner than you hoped for, no doubt."

I said nothing, watching as Catherine placed a drink in the general's hand and walked across the room to where I was sitting. "She doesn't have so much to say. All your running around and sneaking about has -- "

"Look here," the General interrupted, taking another gulp of scotch, "let's just get this over with shall we? Do your dirty business and get out of my house for good, Rufus."

The count turned his attention to the general once more. "Ah yes, my *friend*. It hasn't escaped my attention that you haven't been in touch for a while. I'm so glad that the pictures of you enjoying two of my young servants was enough to bring you back into the fold. Now, where exactly is my microfilm?"

The General reached into his pocket and produced the film. Rufus leant over and plucked it from his grasp.

“Thank you. I’ll certainly take better care of that from now on.”

“I want that film destroyed and the paper copies of the pictures you’ve made. That was the deal ...”

The count silenced the general with a dismissive wave, looking back in my direction. “You see how easy it is to get people on my side, Miss Blaine? All it takes is a little leverage. Tell me, what exactly happened to the men I sent to track you down?”

I allowed myself a little smile of satisfaction. “Colonel Kremp killed himself and his heavies are in military custody.”

The count shrugged. “Well, if you want a job done right, do it yourself, I guess is the lesson there. Poor Kremp, but I’m glad he did the decent thing. Suicide pill was it?”

“What do you intend to do to me?” I demanded, ignoring his question, stalling for time. The thought of Bentley, unconscious and vulnerable two floors above was foremost in my mind.

Count Rufus smiled and wagged a finger in my direction. “It’s not what I intend to do that you should be worried about, Miss Blaine. You’re the one who brought a microfilm to the MoD, supposedly containing compromising material but which subsequently turned out to be completely blank.”

At my side, Catherine produced an identical strip of film to the one I had acquired and placed it on the table beside the general’s chair.

“You’d become delusional during your time undercover, you see,” the count went on, enjoying his little story. “Filled full of stories about Nazis and spies by your lover. It would turn any young lady a little... unbalanced. Of course, when the general confronted you with the sad truth about the microfilm you flew into a rage. And managed to get hold of his gun...”

Without warning, the count fired the pistol point blank at General Basingstoke's chest. He jerked in his chair, eyes bulging from their sockets and then slumped back, shot cleanly through the heart. I let out a cry. I half rose from my chair, but the count trained the gun on me.

"You've just killed a general in Her Majesty's army, I'm afraid," he sneered. "Of course, after that you'll have to get rid of your lover as well. Major Bentley could never cover up for a murderess, even if he was sleeping with her ..."

My eyes unavoidably looked up. Bentley! The count handed the smoking gun to Catherine.

"Go upstairs and put a couple of bullets in Major Bentley, won't you, my dear?"

His mistress looked at him, momentarily aghast.

"But, my count ..."

"Call it a test of loyalty," he said, stroking his hands across her shoulders. "I just can't stand the thought of old lovers of yours hanging around. And it's more poetic that you should do it. Bring things to a nice close, so to speak."

She looked down at the gun and nodded. "Of course. What about her?"

Count Rufus produced a flick knife from his pocket, flipping out the blade. "With Bentley dead she decides to commit suicide. Torn apart by the guilt of what she had done and her own madness, you see."

Catherine gave a short laugh and shot me a quick, unreadable glance as she walked from the room. The count walked to the drinks cabinet and fixed himself a scotch from the open bottle, knocking it back in one gulp.

"You don't really expect anyone to believe this fabrication, do you?" I said, trying to keep my voice low and calm. I didn't believe that I could reason with him, but as long as he was talking, I was still alive.

“Oh, they’ll believe what they’re told to. I have plenty of judges and police officers in my files who will be more than willing to cover up any story in order to save their over-fed necks. Just like the general here...” He patted the dead man’s forehead as he walked round the chair and stood before me. “When Hitler takes Britain, I will be fully inaugurated into the Nazi government, and all past sins will be wiped clean. I’ve been promised a commander’s position in the SS for my services.”

“The Germans will never take England...”

“And what makes you think that?” he demanded. “Your side doesn’t seem to be doing so well at the moment.”

“How can you betray your own country?”

“My country? A country that accused me of being traitor long before I even thought of such things? That brands my friends perverts if they reveal their sexual delights to the world? In Nazi-ruled England these things will not be hidden behind closed doors. They will be celebrated! It is our right as the masters of this country to do what we want, how we want.”

Despite myself, I laughed at the naïveté of his ideas. “The minute the Nazis are in control, they’ll turn on you, just like they have all of Europe. Just like Catherine Carlisle is right now. I know that she’s the one who corrupted you...”

“That’s not true!” he spat, moving to get another drink. “Catherine is loyal to me ...”

“She still loves Bentley, you fool. She’s probably upstairs making a deal with him right now. I take it that it was her idea to come here in person tonight, rather than sending one of your men to finish the job,” I suggested as he turned back to me. I could see from the look on his face that I had guessed correctly. “Why do you think she wanted that?”

“Catherine is like me. She enjoys the thrill of the hunt ... and expects to be there for the final kill.”

I stood from the chair, finding my legs a little unsteady. "If it helps you to rationalise things in that way, go ahead. I just wish I could believe it so easily ..."

Without warning the count dashed his glass to the floor, suddenly enraged. Just as I wanted him to be. It meant he was thinking less clearly.

"It's time for your suicide attempt, Miss Blaine," he said, coming at me with the knife raised. "Rehearsal is over."

I stepped back against the fireplace, as if cowering away from his advance, my hands fumbling behind me as I did so. Blindly, my fingers closed around the handle of the poker that hung beside the hearth. The count was flying at me, the knife raised, and I knew that I only had one chance ...

With all my might I swung the poker round, bringing it upward as I turned. The end of the metal rod made contact with the count's forehead and he spun, carried on unstoppably by his own momentum. He crashed into the fireplace, the knife flying from his grasp, and lay still, his left leg twitching momentarily and then coming to rest. I stepped away from the dreadful scene, turning my gaze away from the blood which was spreading from the wound I had inflicted on his skull, not knowing whether he was dead or alive. For my sins, I did not care.

My only thought was for Bentley.

I debated momentarily whether to exchange the poker for the fallen knife before I left the room, but decided against it. I couldn't see myself wielding the blade against another person, even Catherine Carlisle, and I reminded myself that she had a gun. The poker would more than likely prove useless, anyway.

The stairs spiralled up two flights to the guest bedroom where Bentley slept, but the plush carpet underfoot mercifully disguised my ascent. As I reached the second landing, all I could hear was the beating of my own heart. I approached the door to the bedroom, which

was standing ajar. On an instinct, I leant the poker up against the wall before I pushed open the door...

The window was open and a night breeze billowed the curtains into the room. In the darkness I could make out the figure of Bentley, motionless and deep in sleep where I had left him. Catherine stood over him, the tiny pistol aimed at his head. How long she had been standing there like that I did not know, but I could see that every muscle in her body was tensed. The arm holding the weapon trembled slightly. She did not react when I entered, but I could sense that she knew I was there.

"How strange," she said softly, almost sadly, eyes locked on Bentley's sleeping form. "I find that I can't do it. I always thought it would be easy to kill a man. But I wonder if it is really. Or maybe it's just him."

I took another step into the room.

"Maybe it's a bit of both," I said quietly. "Maybe love doesn't die so easily..."

She tore her eyes away from him and met mine. I saw a wetness there that might have been tears.

"Maybe it doesn't," she agreed, lowering the gun to her side. "Or maybe I just need a little target practice first..."

I threw myself backward as she raised the gun, falling out of the room and onto the landing as a bullet ripped through the doorframe above my head. I heard the woman let out an inhuman cry as she came running. I reached for the poker once more. I brought the rod low across the doorway, hitting her lower legs as she charged through, gun poised. Catherine fell across the landing and toppled over the banister rail before I could grab her, only managing to stop her fall at the last second by grabbing the railing. I leapt to my feet and leant over the rail. The gun had fallen two flights down to clatter loudly against the tiles of the hall floor.

“Take my hand!” I cried, reaching down to her. She looked up, her previously tear-filled eyes filled with rage and hate once more.

“I would have killed him, you know,” she whispered, straining from the effort of holding on by her fingernails. “I would have killed you both. I just needed more time ... more ...”

With that, her grip failed and she plummeted backward. I watched in horror for a split second, eyes still locked on hers as she fell screaming. At the last moment I looked away to avoid the sight of her death.

I moved to the bedroom once more, climbing onto the mattress and placing myself beside Bentley, who stirred in his sleep as the bed shifted.

“Miss Blaine...” he said thickly, looking round at me and half-opening his eyes. “I had a bloody terrible dream. Must be the drugs they gave me for the pain. Is everything okay?”

I smiled and placed my head on his shoulder.

“Yes,” I said. “It’s better than okay. And do you think you could start calling me Agatha anytime soon?”

Bentley chuckled and placed a kiss on my lips. “Agatha.”

I leant up on my elbows and looked at him. We’d finally made it. Despite everything, we’d won. “There are some things I have to tell you...”

Epilogue

The September morning was crisp and invigorating, a clear sign of autumn in the Peaks. We left our boarding house in Bakewell following a hearty breakfast. Although it was not my usual habit, Jack had made me eat a full English in preparation for what he promised would be an *invigorating hike* that day. Having heard that phrase before many times, I mentally prepared myself for blisters and general exhaustion by the end of the day. However,

I had not seen him so happy since the end of the war and couldn't help getting swept along by the promise of the day as we set off past the train station and into the open countryside.

"Do you remember this?" Bentley asked as we walked along. My hand found his. He was referring to the train station and the countryside that we had fled through on our escape from Colonel Kremp and his men.

"The circumstances are a little nicer this time," I replied and he smiled at me, suddenly looking little different to the first time I had seen him, some five years before.

We walked through the morning, stopping for lunch by a stream and unpacking the sandwiches prepared by the pub's landlady. The bread was a little dry and tasteless, but the slices of cheese and ham were generous considering the rationing that was still in force. Jack rose stiffly from the rock on which he was sitting and ran a hand up his back, wincing a little as he did so.

"Pain?" I asked and he waved it away.

"Just a twinge. You know, the old complaint."

The complaint. Our euphemism for the bullet wound he had received that day as we had fled from Colonel Kremp's men. Every now and then he would suffer spasms of pain, usually on the colder days of the year.

"Winter's coming," he said as he helped me to my feet. "It's never wrong."

"Goodness," I said. "Not yet! The summer's only just over."

We walked on into the afternoon, meeting no more than three people all day. After the bustle of London it was a blessed relief as always to get back to the countryside. But my companion huffed and puffed a little as the day wore on.

"Having trouble there?" I asked wryly as I saw Jack struggle to mount one of the stiles, a little red-faced.

"Bloody desk job," he said. Bentley's reward for bringing down the count, among other services, had been the assignment of rebuilding the spy network at the MoD following

General Basingstoke's death. By the end of the war he was running the show, a position which took him out of the field for the most part and confined him to the office. He professed to detest the paperwork and bureaucracy involved in the task, but secretly I suspected that he was beginning to enjoy the life of the respected elder of the intelligence trade.

"Too many cream cakes for lunch," I teased, poking him in the ribs. He laughed and chased me up the hill. As we reached the crest, I looked down into a rolling valley, making out the shape of a stately home in the distance. Jack stopped at my side, placing a hand on my arm.

"Is that what I think it is?"

"I thought we might take a look," he said, pulling me close. "But if you don't want to go down there, I understand."

I looked in his face, so full of concern, and kissed him. "Let's go. You need the exercise."

It took another half hour to reach the entrance to the estate. The impressive wrought-iron gates had been removed at some point since I had last been there. We followed the long drive down, finding that the manicured lawns of the count's estate were overgrown, the grass standing almost at knee height in most places. The fountains were empty now and the statues that had adorned the passage to the house had been either taken or toppled. Yet it was the house itself that had undergone the starkest change.

The roof was gone, long since burnt out by fire, the windows of the façade empty and staring. The east wing of the house, which had at one time housed the count's secrets, was now a pile of rubble, having ironically been hit by a German fighter looking to dump his remaining bombs on the way out from London. The rest of the house seemed to have been the target of arsonists, judging by some of the graffiti scrawled into the remaining woodwork

and the bricks of the walls. *Nazi filth. Traitor's den.* We walked in silence up the leaf-strewn steps and through the open doorway into the main hall.

The grand staircase had fallen to the ground and lay there in pieces. The artwork that had adorned the wall was gone, long since requisitioned by the MoD forces sent in to clear out the house after the count's death. Whatever was left had either been looted or destroyed. I stepped over a broken picture frame and looked toward the dining room, the doors of which were miraculously still standing. Taking Jack's hand in mine, I led him over, pushing the doors apart with some effort.

The dining room was open to the sky and birds rose from the floor as we entered. The wooden floor was thick with dirt and debris, but amazingly the table still stood, presumably too large for even the most determined thief to carry away. The antique chairs that had surrounded it were long gone, however. I walked to the table and ran a finger through the layers of dirt, revealing some of the original lustre beneath.

"It's strange," I said as Jack put his arms around my shoulders, holding me close.

"What is?"

"I can't help feeling saddened by it all," I said, pressing myself against him. "It was so beautiful here. But ... so false. And now it's all gone forever."

Bentley nodded, showing that he understood. "Just a ruin. Count Rufus would have made all England like this, given half the chance. If you hadn't stopped him that night, that is."

I imagined the alternative for a moment: the count and Catherine Carlisle sitting in the dining room amidst their German allies in the heart of an England ruled by the Nazis, swastikas decorating the walls. The very possibility of it seemed like a terrible nightmare now, something inconceivable. Yet we had come close.

“Do you ever think about her?” The question sprang from my lips even before I realised that I was going to ask it. I couldn’t remember the last time we had spoken of Catherine. Jack was silent for a moment before he turned me in his arms and looked deep into my eyes.

“The only time I ever do is when I think about how lucky I am not to have lost you that night.”

I felt tears well in my eyes. He reached out and brushed them away.

“I’m sorry, Agatha. I shouldn’t have brought us here ...”

I silenced him with a shake of my head. “It’s okay. Now we never have to come here again. It’s over. Someone should bulldoze this place to the ground once and for all.”

“That can be arranged. Let’s get out of here.”

With that we walked arm in arm out into the sunlight again, feeling better with every yard we put between ourselves and the shattered remains of Count Rufus’ dreams. We could spend the rest of the day in peace. Halfway back to the estate entrance, however, a car appeared, moving swiftly up the drive toward us. As it grew closer, I made out the unmistakeable plates of the ministry and we exchanged a look.

“How the hell did they find us here?” Jack protested.

“I might have mentioned that we would be in the area,” I replied sheepishly. “Lady Richmond must have put two and two together.”

“I thought we agree no work for one weekend ...”

The car drew up before us and a fresh-faced young driver sprang out, ran up before us and delivered a sharp salute.

“Major Bentley!”

“Why the hell are you disturbing our weekend?” Jack demanded testily and I jabbed him in the ribs.

“Don’t be such a bear,” I said, turning back to the boy. “Go on, Corporal.”

"There's a situation, Major Bentley," he continued, eyeing Jack up and down and clearly nervous as hell to be in the presence of the effective head of the ministry. "Berlin, they said. You need to catch a plane tonight."

Jack looked at me and rolled his eyes. "Bloody Berlin again! As if we haven't got enough problems over here. That whole place is going to turn into one massive liability, you mark my words."

I nodded my agreement but turned back to the messenger. "Alright, Corporal, get on the radio and tell them you're bringing me back to the city. Have someone at the ministry pack a bag and get me a driver in Berlin who knows the ropes."

"Yes, Major Bentley!" The driver gave another salute and ran back to the car.

"Want to come with me, General?" I asked, placing my hand's around Jack's neck. "I'll treat you to sauerkraut."

My husband wrinkled his nose and shook his head. "I think I'll walk back to Bakewell. This sounds like a one-woman job. Besides, I ..."

"Need the exercise," I laughed, finishing his sentence for him. "I love you."

Bentley pulled me close and kissed me deeply right there in the driveway, a kiss in which we both lost ourselves for a moment. Even after three years of marriage, we could still do that -- and were blessed with the opportunity to do so for many years to come. When we finally broke, I looked round to see the driver gawping at us through the windscreen. He hurriedly averted his eyes. Giving Bentley a final squeeze, I walked to the car and climbed into the back, waving away the driver when he moved to open the door for me.

"What's the matter, Corporal?" I asked, noting that he was still a little red-faced. "Haven't you ever seen a major kissing a general before?"

"Uh ... No, ma'am."

As the car pulled away I looked back, giving a wave. In the distance the house almost looked like it had on the first day that I saw it. In the middle of the driveway the man who

had saved me so many times and who had allowed himself to be saved in turn, raised his hand to wish me a safe trip. I felt the familiar pang of parting. For a moment he looked just like he had that day in Pride's: confident, mysterious, like a man who had a million secrets that you wanted to tease out.

"Driver, stop the car!" I ordered, seized by a sudden impulse. The corporal slammed on the brakes, almost throwing me into the front.

"Major! Lady Richmond said time is..."

I clapped him on the shoulder. "Berlin can wait. At least for another day. Pick me up from Bakewell tomorrow."

He opened his mouth to protest, but I was already out the door and running back down the drive. I fell into Bentley's arms.

"Berlin?" he asked as he spun me round.

"Tomorrow. Tonight... us."

 THE END 

Lucinda Thorne

Lucinda was born and raised in England where she attended (and was expelled from) a number of prestigious boarding schools. After graduating from Cambridge University she was determined to squeeze every drop of experience from life, leading a nomadic existence across Europe and Asia for many years before finally settling in Melbourne, Australia. In her time she has worked as a model in Paris, driven a taxi in Warsaw and taught English in Seoul. She now lives near the sea and walks her dogs on the beach every day, where she feels at peace.

Lucinda says, "I've been blessed with a wild life full of ups and downs, happiness and regrets. What more could a writer ask for?"