

PROLOGUE

Friday October 16 1942
Saint Aunx, Gers

That night there had been half a moon in a clear sky, an autumn moon catching the puddles on curfewed cobblestones. It had rained all afternoon then stopped as night fell. It was often like that: it came from being near the sea, that's what they said.

There was a strip of light from the Pharmacie leaking round the blind. He'd get it in the neck for that if they saw it, stupid old fool. Not that you got many about on a Friday night. The place is deserted, all of them stuck inside, drinking floc, wireless blaring away, minding their own.

Why did she think he'd do it? It was always Thierry that got to do things, anything stupid - him or one of the crowd. *Why me?* There must have been something about him: soft or something.

It had been Wednesday - two days ago. They were in the Café Flore, just messing about, bitching about the new coffee, not that it was coffee. Thierry saying he wouldn't pay, not for that muck. A real row starting, when who should come in but the Englishwoman. They called her that, although not to her face, you wouldn't risk that, her so sure you took her for French. Nobody did. It was that way she had of tilting her head up. And that stupid smile. A smile for everybody, and that's one smile too many. People don't smile in Saint Aunx, funny she'd not noticed. And that hat: how come she didn't know only tarts wore hats like that? But more it's the other things - the way she's always that bit too familiar, wanting you to like her. The way she leans over the table letting Thierry give her a peck, letting him see down her front. Too familiar, that's her trouble. Too familiar that Wednesday as well, squeezing in, jockeying the others along the bench, letting you feel the warmth of her, Thierry pushing, nuzzling you into perfumed fur and soft flesh.

There's nothing to do in the Café Flore. Just a place to sit until Joël in the bar across the square takes the shutters down and leans them against the door. You'd think he'd shift them, but he never does. After the shutters you wait till the covers come off the billiards table, then the whole crowd shoves off. That morning, trying to get past, shaking coins out onto the table, struggling against her knees, feeling his coat snagging. Until he saw. Not snagging - a hand, very small, milky white, holding the coat under the table. A single tug, nothing more.

She waited till they'd gone, the glass door smashing closed, Thierry gawping back inside, grinning. You could tell what they were thinking. *Why him?* That's what they were thinking. He'd asked himself the same.

"Don't bother about them. Look here."

A nice voice. Really proper French, like the School Mistress. A little book in her hands. A book of poems.

"I'm going to write something inside. You can say your girl gave it you. What's your name?"

"Rémy."

"What's your girl called?"

"How'd you know there is one? Fabienne, if you want to know."

"Nice name. I'll put *For Rémy from F* – you don't want anything sloppy. Now, you can do something for me," shaking her hair back, glancing to the door. But they'd gone, already halfway across the square, Thierry bent over, cupping his hands round his crutch, pretending to gag.

"Number eight. There's a brass plaque on the door. Knock just the once – d'you understand? Like this. Just one tap. Somebody will answer. Give him the book."

"You can do that yourself – it's just over there."

That was when she'd smiled. Little wrinkles round dark blue eyes. She'd forgotten that as well: girls round here don't have blue eyes.

"No, I can't do that, Rémy. It has to be Friday. I won't be here. That's why I'm asking you. Nine o'clock, remember. That's not late. Wait for the church clock, that would be best. Just one knock. He'll hear."

"What about the curfew? The Germans. Curfew's half past eight - I'll get myself done for that."

"Nine o'clock's not late, not really. Tell them you're going home. But nobody's going to ask. Everybody knows you – they won't make a fuss. You're a good boy. And there's this."

A banknote folded in two, a picture on the front, a woman with a squint perched up like a statue. Hell - a thousand! He'd never seen a note that big.

"I don't want that much. It's too much."

"No, you take it. Buy yourself something nice. Or your girl. You take it. Just do this for me."

One

There were seven of them – five men, two women. A truck picked them up at Strathcarron in a blizzard, the stiff tarpaulin cover whipping open, feeble light inside cutting yellow across tumbling swirls of snow. At Achnasheen they stopped to take on the last of the women then, as the snowfall eased, turned West to Kinlochewe, creeping along a narrow glen, impossible ice walls rearing into a night sky. At the far end of the valley, huge frozen stars hung low over the brooding hump of Liathach, all the time Alex thinking how odd it seemed to find the blackout in Torridon. Alright, there was a war on, but who the hell would want to bomb this place? Even finding it would be a miracle.

The driver nearly missed his turn, jolting them against each other on the slatted wooden seats. The sound of the engine changed, echoing back from rows of little stone houses. Alex pushed the cover aside. They had passed through gates, grinding up a gravelled incline, engine screaming. A rectangle of light reached out across the snow: a man framed against lamplight at an open door, rhododendrons banked high on either side closing over him.

At the top, the truck drove straight into a kind of barn, wooden doors flung back. They stumbled out one by one into the smell of cattle. As Alex jumped down, stiff with cold, he collided with the woman who had got on at Achnasheen, grabbing her arm with a gloved hand to steady himself.

"Sorry. Where the hell are we? Do you have the faintest idea? Only don't say Scotland – I worked that bit out."

"That's the best I could do, I'm afraid. I'd say a good long way from anywhere else. Will that do?"

She had a nice voice: deep, just the faintest hint of something foreign. Nothing unusual there, the whole lot of them were a little odd in the language department, all walking with a slight limp you might say, accent-wise. The little imperfections that had got them here in the first place, had got them through the training. The knowledge they were that bit special keeping them sane, more or less. This was the third training camp, his last, but he'd not seen her before.

"Were you at Ringway? Funny, I didn't see you?"

She shook her head. "Parachutes? No, did that ages ago. I'm here for a course. The bloke who gives it wouldn't come South. Hell of a way."

She turned to look at the distant house set against the steep slope of the hill: high mullioned windows, stone balconies, pepperpot turrets decked out with aials. "Although I must say it's a pretty place."

"Only the best for us. SOE - Stately 'Omes of England and all that. Except it's not - England, I mean." It was an old joke, she didn't smile back. "They do us proud, don't you think? Reminds you of nice young women in drawing rooms debating whether the milk goes in first or second."

"And you would know what, exactly, about nice young women?"

So that was how it had begun, the two of them watching the rest of the group, a little knot of weary people crunching through packed snow, dragging kitbags. Nearing the top of the drive a sudden splash of light sparkled out from an open door across the ice - wavering candles on polished mahogany, the glint of silver.

The two left behind stood together in an empty shed puddled with cowpats, neither making the first move. That was how it began. It's a mistake to fall behind, you get that drummed into you – it's a golden rule, it really is. But not this once. Falling behind paired them for whatever time they had left.

Her name was Justine Perry. She had grinned telling him, saying he could call her Just for short if he really wanted because she always tried to be. She had lived in France most of her life, getting out after the fall of Poland. Came home, she said, to do her bit. Married, he thought. At least, she wore a ring because she had displayed it in that first session when they'd gone through the usual *personal effects* rigmarole. Pulling it off with a jerk, ostentatiously dropping it into the cardboard box, putting up with the Instructor's predictable coarse joke. They smiled on cue. Best to smile, because you could see at once this one was a vindictive bastard. So they all smiled, even Justine.

He found a place next to her that evening at the dining table. The house must have been grand in its heyday: an Edwardian folly thrown up at titanic expense by a Glasgow brewer in search of a peerage. Glass fronted cases lining the walls of a deserted gun room bore witness to long-forgotten shooting parties, even Royalty, so they said. Before the Great War had put shooting to other uses, leaving the brewer with both his sons dead at Ypres.

Faint patches on the figured wallpaper showed where pictures had once been: fake ancestors, somebody on a horse perhaps, more likely some animal about to die. They should have left that one up, Special Operations Executive having its own brand of humour.

They were sitting at a massive table, borrowed regimental silver winking in candlelight. High above, cherubs blew kisses to muscular painted nudes inside three enormous plaster cartouches. Beyond the point where dusters could reach, cobwebs waved in the rising heat. Huge mirrors in gilded ormolu frames set off each end of the room, the glass speckled with age.

Someone had screwed a wooden plaque into the polished mahogany of the figured double door, declaring *Mess Room*, the tiny act of vandalism reminding those few who might doubt it that war changes the rules. The place was already blue with cigarette smoke.

"Really married?"

At first he thought she was going to snub him. Cold blue eyes, rather large for her face, insolently fixing his. Then she smiled, glancing down at her hand, accepting a cigarette.

"Looks like it."

So he had had to settle for ambiguity even at the start. Still accept it three nights later, lying hard against her in a bed big enough for Victoria herself, army sheets smelling of carbolic soap. Even then she had not elaborated, beyond saying she was here for specialised training. She had done all that boy scout stuff long ago. She was trained – made her sound like a performing seal, didn't it? Although this particular seal had a few last tricks to learn. Otherwise she was going to keep out of the cold. She already had missions under her belt - *aye, and still alive, the noo*, mimicking the Highland accent of the Instructor.

Perhaps it was the nonchalant cruelty of that wiry little chap that drew them together. A gymnasium had been improvised in a dusty ballroom, but he had declared it useless, fit only

for faggots. What the hell was the army coming to if you trained *indoors*? He managed to make the word sound blasphemous.

Training was conducted in a pitiless landscape, snow banked so deep that walking was impossible, air so cold breathing was eked out to spare the pain. Their days were spent cracking ice to drag themselves through water tasting of blood. Fumbling the silencer onto the Standard Model B, fingers bloated by frost, then screwing it in again, this time blindfold. Then firing the damned thing.

You'll never win a goldfish that way Captain Vere, sir. It's not a rifle. Don't look. Dip. Up. Point. Squeeze. Go for the body, man, always the body. Two shots, sir. Rat Tat. Better sir, much better. Except he's shot you by now. You're dead and he's half way to Paris. Get a move on for Christ's sake.

Their days were so coloured with violence there was no time to remember he had once thought it might have been different, might have been about something else. Knife work in the second week confirmed otherwise. A stubby little thing, the standard issue knife, barely longer than your fist. Double edged, what's more, the better to work both ways.

You're slitting throats Captain Vere, not stabbing anybody. Stabbing's for girls, begging your pardons ladies. Stab him and he'll take too long to die. Take you with him more than likely. No. Like this. Over the top. Pull. Head back. Slit.

The snow was so severe one day they crowded into the Mess briefly to consider traitors, a blessed relief to be indoors.

Now the manual says you have a choice. You pay him off, you warn him off or you kill him. I beg to take issue with the manual on this. Kill him. Search him if there's time. But kill him first.

Then codes: a tweed back all they saw of a supercilious man scribbling on a blackboard. *The Playfair Code is for boy Scouts. Broken like this. Now watch carefully please - scratch - and this - scratch. You see? Not that they did. Poem codes. Double transposition. Chose your poem. No Captain Vere, I'm afraid Rule Britannia is taken. The code's as good as the poem, so write your own. If they break it - and they will - you might as well send en clair. We're working on one-time keys. Printed on silk. Alas, not ready yet. Questions?*

Spared this, Justine lay on her bed listening to the sporadic crackle of live fire across the hills, watching snow nestle quietly into the corners of windowpanes, thinking of *A Christmas Carol*. Perhaps remembering what Mr Dickens had in store for her, curled up on granny's sofa a lifetime ago, when Christmas seemed to mean something.

She would smile at Alex and his day in the field, him telling her he could barely remember Christmas and he wasn't going to start now, not when the whole caboodle was about to go up. Not when you need a bath, she'd say, and call him a maudlin bugger, letting him burrow into the heat of her, letting him find a way to forget they didn't have all that long.

Six weeks, the little man said, seeming proud of the number, of its precision, strutting about in the uniform of an army major. Not that he *was* a Major in anybody's army: that fooled nobody. It's what you learn first in this enterprise - people are never what they claim. Then you remember that applies to you as well. That's when you understand all you have is pantomime to hang on to.

That first evening, seated in lines on hard chairs, wondering who this man really was, a rickety blackboard out of place in a forlorn room someone once had called a library, leather spines untouched for fifty years releasing a foxy smell into the air, Alex had shivered. The little Major on his dais, catching the movement like a dog scenting prey, fixed him with soft eyes: a doctor bearing bad news.

"It's Captain Vere, isn't it? An average, of course. Unpleasant, but true. Operational lifetime - six weeks. But look, we're here to change all that."

A quiet laconic style that somehow managed to suck the truth out of his words. Best not to believe a word this chap says – he'd be better off selling cars.

"We're getting better though. Quite a lot, lately. Thanks to what you pick up here. What McIntyre's putting you through is going to be worth your life, believe me."

Getting into his stride, the room wondering how many times he had said all this before. How many dozens of previous faces, dead now, their six weeks being up? They said he'd been driven across from Inverness. In a huge staff car, its grey anonymity shouting Secret Intelligence Service. Flown up that morning. Surely not just for a pep talk? Ian somebody or other: Major Ian somebody, SIS. If he really was a Major.

"If you're going to survive – and it's our job to see you do – you must believe in the system. We designed it to save your life ..." The theatrical pause for effect spoiled rather by a Sergeant's choosing that particular moment to bustle in with the stack of little cardboard boxes. He had to relieve the guard at the gatehouse. Could they be handed out now, sir?

Two pills in each box: Benzedrine, wrapped in a paper spill printed *as required*. Use it right and you might keep awake for thirty hours. Or not ... it wasn't a guarantee. And the other? The 'L' tablet in its little rubber shell. Well, bite that and you were fifteen seconds from eternity. Expected, of course, but all the same leaving them peering into their tiny pillboxes, thinking complicated thoughts, the flying Major quite forgotten.

Alex would always remember Justine at that moment, catching his stricken face, winking, twirling the little tablet between her fingers like something she might pop into her mouth any minute, finally poking it into the pocket of her blouse. Keeping the sweetie for later, her expression said. He couldn't even look in his box - he'd get round to that eventually. That was the difference between the two of them.

The Major, having lost his audience, was busy switching to another page of his script. He seemed almost too young to be in long trousers, although when he got going you could see why they had given him this job, nodding to the Sergeant, stepping just the right inch back, suitably solemn, gracefully ceding the floor, *of course. Carry on Sergeant, carry on*, voice adopting the slightly parsonical register reserved for these odd bits of awkwardness.

"Perhaps a good time to say when to ... er ... *bite* is not a solely personal decision." He let the pause stretch out an uncomfortable beat too long, "Please accept that if there is no choice, there is no choice. That's the logic of the enterprise we're all committed to. Obviously, if captured - whatever your rank - you will not be in uniform."

He let his glance flick over the heads of the women, coming to land on Justine, "Ladies too ... although in your case the uniforms of the First Aid Nursing Yeomanry. We have to trust to the FANY to give you the necessary protection of a uniform ..."

He seemed not at all discomfited by the embarrassed silence that followed, until Justine burst out laughing, calling out, "That name! It's a joke. Anyway, we're hardly Yeomen, are we? Hasn't anybody noticed? So we're to go to war with *Fanny* tied round our necks. I ask you! Women of pleasure – *filles de joie* - was that the idea?"

It was a long time before he replied, turning aside to stare at the bleak landscape outside, waiting for the laughter to subside, the scrape of chairs to fall silent. "You work without uniforms. Obviously. But that's not to deny your right to one – man or woman – and the enemy should respect that right. They probably will not. If you are taken, you will in all probability be considered a spy. You will be coerced – tortured - activities outlawed under

the laws of war. And you will succumb. That's why taking your own life is not solely a personal decision. A whole circuit may stand at risk."

The last day was a Sunday. Albeit the Sabbath, it seemed appropriate to squeeze Assassination in before breakfast: *Written orders in all circumstances*. Someone had pinned up a Notice in the hall, *Morning Service 1100 hours, Torridon Kirk. All welcome*. Alex and Justine walked through the snow in blinding sunlight to the tiny church, to hear the Reverend McClure rail against the Pope. It was hard to say what they had expected: perhaps that god, having an interest in the ways of Special Operations, had, after due consideration, suspended a commandment or two. Perhaps that God, reflecting on the distinction between lawful killing and the other sort might appreciate how their cause sanctified their deeds. But on that Sunday, God had other things on his hands. He had the perfidious ways of Catholics to reckon with – apparently a consuming preoccupation. At which Justine kneeled on the dusty boards to pray, the papist gesture drawing loud tuts from the old ladies sitting behind.

"How did the old fool know I wasn't one?" Walking back, clutching his arm, already thinking of bed.

"You mean Catholic?" thinking of the little pill. "Are you?"

"Could be ... he wasn't to know. He was taking a risk with the six weeks brigade: *You're trained to kill, lassie – Aye, remember that*. I could have strangled him. I'm inclined to go back right now and do it."

Back at the house they traded black jokes about the Pope. About the time they had left. About brief lives. Traded jokes all through that last afternoon, drinking gin in bed, curtains open to the darkening sky, the window glass figured over with crystalline ferns. White feathers she said: they looked like white feathers. And he flying into a sudden temper asking what the hell she meant by that, she saying nothing, nothing at all, they just made her think of home. And which home would that be? Shouting for the hundredth time, importunate, thinking of *personal effects*, thinking of the ring. She flaring back, it's none of your business, pestering him into one last hopeless coupling, screaming drunken improvisations on the letter L into his ears as her breath grew heavy.

And that was the end of Justine. He thought never to see her again.