

https://dspace.org/

Other people's countries

Barker, Julie

2015-08-27
http://hdl.handle.net/10539/18342

Downloaded from a DSpace repository. https://dspace.org/

Other People's Countries

Julie Barker

Faculty of Humanities

School of Literature and Language Studies

Department of Creative Writing

Supervisor: Dr. Michelle Adler

Julie Barker

Student Number: 509373

June 2015

The blood of martyrs is the seed of the church.

- Winston Churchill

Part 1

A Drifting World

Chapter 1

Desert Fox, June 1942

Crossing the front line requires careful and meticulous preparation. You should liaise with the local commander to ensure local forces are aware of your move. Systematic reconnaissance of the enemy is essential. You must have a complete picture of his locations, flanks, unit boundaries …

SOE Handbook.

The desert was flat, endless and silent. Janis sat wedged between Corporal Davy MacMillan and Captain Max Skinner. Davy drove the truck which was towards the end of the single file of other vehicles and tanks. It was a struggle to keep on the seasoned Bedouin tracks in order to avoid being swallowed up by sinkholes. Janis was lulled by the mind numbing sluggishness of the truck, her cotton scarf wrapped loosely around her head to ward off the burning sky. Far ahead soldiers sang an unrecognisable song.

Janis looked up as the sky darkened. Cloud galloped towards them, on its heels came the yapping wind. Its moan rose as a grim accompaniment, like a dog to its master. Swathes of billowing sand gathered momentum. Then grit assaulted Janis. It burned her eyes and burrowed into her ears and nostrils. Gooseflesh ran across her skin. Janis turned to a sunburnt and dirty Skinner. His eyes were slits against the roughening storm and into the sudden squealing wind he bellowed instructions. Janis wondered how Davy had heard one syllable of what Skinner had said. Clearly he had, because he put the truck into a higher gear and increased the speed.

Janis grabbed at her whipping scarf and pulled the thin cotton tight across her face. It kept on slipping down, inviting the abrasion to continue. Davy shouted, but the wind kept up its onslaught against her eardrums. The sand blasted her scalp. Janis hunkered down over herself. For a brief moment she opened her eyes. All she could see through stretched open khaki was her own dirty stomach. Her weight pressed against her solar plexus and rendered her breathless.

Janis closed her eyes, and the sand inside her lids made her involuntarily weep. Janis caught a side glimpse of Skinner. He too bore shining narrow tracks that ran the length of his face. They cut through grimy dirt.

A shout rang out and the truck caravan juddered to a halt. Skinner and Davy yelled at one another across her but she struggled to hear what they were saying to one another. Skinner eventually leapt out from their truck. Janis managed to catch sight of him trudging up to confer with the commanding Major-General Stuart, before the swirling mass of sand rained down on her like a dense and murky curtain.

Janis felt Davy grabbing at her, his hands rough and cold. She understood he wanted them to get off and she clambered blindly down from the truck. Davy scrambled beneath the vehicle and Janis followed. She crawled in after Davy and for a brief moment he slumped on hot sand. Then he began to pat his pockets, searching. Finally lying beneath the hot engine her fear leaked out of her.

Davy struggled to light a cigarette. His thumb, the nail bitten to the quick, kept slipping off the spark-wheel. Eventually he succeeded and his hand shook slightly as he handed Janis the cigarette. She smiled at him gratefully and he smiled back, his missing teeth no longer surprising to her.

'If the Major's speaking to Captain Skinner, then something's up.

Janis nodded, not wanting to show him how quickly her anxiety was increasing. After two weeks in the desert she was ready to throw in the towel and get back to the comforts of Cairo. She had managed to take about thirty photographs. At first Janis had been permanently fuelled by adrenaline, watching blinding sunrises over golden dunes. But she had quickly become disappointed by her failure to capture the vast emptiness

It started as a murmur and then swelled rapidly down the caravan, 'Knightsbridge's gone. 201st guards Brigade withdrawn. We've lost Gazala…'

‘Bloody Norrie, crap Commander if ever there was one.’

Panic squeezed her throat closed. ‘Davy, what does this mean for Tobruk?’

‘If they’ve had to withdraw to the Gazala line then Tobruk’s vulnerable, init?’ Apprehension shone through his grubby face.

Janis struggled to contain the febrile panic that ripped up through her. tears felt too close to the surface now. Davy didn’t seem to realise. But when Skinner slid beneath the truck next to them it was the first thing he noticed.

‘Bloody hell, get a grip, Janis.’

‘You drag me out here, make me take countless photographs of soldiers, keep me in the dark and then expect me to be utterly incurious about what is obviously a dangerous state of affairs. What kind of bloody soldier are you?’

Skinner stared at her. Davy looked away, pretending Janis was not in an incomprehensible emotional state. He scrambled for his lighter, and eventually lit another cigarette. As he passed it towards Janis, Skinner grabbed it and pulled the nicotine deep into his lungs. She laughed, a dreadful baying sound. This made Davy even more uncomfortable.

‘Rommel’s taken Knightsbridge. He’s pushed us as far back as Acroma. We’re going to turn around and head to El Adem and back up the fourth division. They’re hopelessly under resourced. It’s a bloody disaster.’ Skinner spat out some dirty tobacco.

Disappointment made her tremble. In this arid, shifting reality, Knightsbridge had become a final destination in her mind. She knew that it was nothing more than two fat tins filled with sand holding a handmade flag, but it symbolised a hundred miles safe point from Tobruk. And Tobruck was where she was certain James was.

‘Lieutenant-General Richie’s their commander, he knows what he’s doing, sir.’

‘That may be so Corporal, but I wonder if Major-General Klopper does.’

‘Klopper, he’s heading up the South African Second Division, isn’t he? They’re based in Tobruk.’ Janis felt a stillness settling.

‘The man’s got hardly any on the ground experience.’

‘He’ll hold Tobruk, sir. He’ll be too afraid of what Churchill will do to him if he doesn’t.’

‘Get out there, Corporal, we’re turning around if the storm’s over.’

Davy scrambled out from underneath the truck. Janis cast a sideways glance at Skinner, his thick black hair oily and plastered to his face. There were days old grease streaks on his arms, dirt beneath the tidy nails. His sweat stained shirt and shorts were too big for him, men lost weight quickly in the desert. Everyone lost weight quickly, it was dehydration. She wondered how she had ever thought him too smooth for his own good. His eyes were bloodshot, and like all of the other men he was dog-tired. He was a far cry from the suave sophisticate she’d convinced to take her on this trip.

Janis began to wiggle backwards to get out from under the truck.

‘You could get to see far more than you bargained for, now.’

‘I know that.’

She scrambled up and thanked God the sandstorm had abated. Some of the tanks appeared almost entirely wrapped in sand. Men were trying to sweep the sand off them. Janis hauled out the camera, positioned it on the edge of their truck and focused the lens on the incongruous sight of a soldier sweeping his tank with a broom. He turned and caught the flash of her lens off the sun. He spat on the ground. She didn’t linger on her guilt.

There was enough of the scorching sunset to set up a temporary camp for the night. Alongside the other officers, Janis worked rapidly to set up her tent. She knew how to do it now. Later, around the fire, eating yet another can of bully beef, Davy told them all a story.

'She'd only been with me for half a year. When I got back from me training in Corset the Dorset I was desperate, wasn't I. All the letters talkin' about how happy she'd be when I got home. Well there I was at the front door, and she's lookin'at me all queer. Can I come in I says. Now's not a good time says she.'

The men began to chuckle and shift in anticipation.

Janis caught sight of Skinner with General Stuart. He seemed unhappy, talking animatedly, shaking his head.

'… so I says to her, I been writing to you for the last six months, you been tellin'me nuffin but steamy stories. Next minute I hear a creakin' and see another fella, half jack behind 'er…'

The men began to groan. Summers nudged Janis, and she pretended to smile. Skinner and Stuart's conversation appeared to have escalated to a fight.

'…So I pull back me fist…'

'D'you give him a nice shiner, Davy?'

'Nah, but she didn't leave the house for a week.'

The men guffawed, as the General gesticulated angrily. Janis turned back to the fire and the men as Skinner threw an openly perplexed look her way. The general didn't want her to come with them, she surmised. She hugged her knees and stared into the camp fire. The men's voices became muted. Davy poked a stick into the heart of the flame and it expanded. The heat pulsated outwards, as if beckoning to her. The warmth was like a

narcotic balm numbing the insides of her mind. Janis found herself listening closely to every hot ember as it cackled and hissed its song of dread and anticipation.

***

The first time they'd set up camp Janis had photographed them raising up the standard brown army tents. The large ones to house the troops, and smaller ones to accommodate ranking officers. This was where she'd first met Davy.

'Heave...'

And the men would pull up the tent sides, with ropes some of them almost too frail to hold the heavy canvas taut for long. Davy, skinny with knobbly knees collapsed first, the canvas crumpling over him.

'Hope you got that, love?' asked Summers.

Janis lowered the camera, feeling guilty. She hoped she'd caught it too.

'Bloody, Girl…'

'Bugger off, Summers.' Davy scrambled to his feet.

Rogers, a company Sergeant barked at Davy. 'Macmillan, go help the real girl pitch her tent, then.'

There was lots of jeering laughter as Davy stalked towards her. However when he got close, she realised he didn't need her pity. He looked pleased to have escaped. As Davy unrolled her tent she asked him about it.

'First the officers tent, Miss. Then we dig the bogs. 'Course I'm pleased to be helping you, I'm going to make sure it becomes my sole mission.'

He laughed then and Janis was fascinated by his missing teeth in an otherwise fairly healthy mouth. That first night, the moon was a plump silver orb. As they all sat round the fire after a meagre tinned supper, Janis thanked Sergeant Rogers for her tent. He sniffed.

'Have to don't I? Can't have you bunking down with a pack of men. This lot'll devour you in no time. It's not right in my opinion. A woman out here.'

'I'm absolutely fine, Sergeant, please, you shouldn't worry about me at all.'

Rogers eyed her grimly. 'It's not you I'm worried about.'

Summers, the man who'd jeered at Davy earlier, eyed her shiftily. 'Being alone has its disadvantages. I mean, if you're asleep who's going to warn you when the hooded viper visits.' He lisped over the last few words and a few of the men began to laugh.

'I've read about them. They live just beneath the sand apparently. Have any of you seen one?'

Summers seemed a bit put out, at her lack of fear. Davy laughed then. Skinner approached and asked to speak to Janis privately.

Away from the heat of the fire, she could feel the icy wind picking up. Skinner surveyed the sky.

'No Polaris tonight.'

'You don't always see it.'

'Janis, we'd like a few sets of photographs, formal ones of the company. Nothing too difficult I would imagine. And then something more informal. A sort of document of life in the desert. Obviously you'll be discreet and respectful.'

‘Of course.’

He blew smoke abruptly, ‘Where’s your tent?’

‘Over there.’

He moved towards it and she realised he intended to escort her.

‘There’s no need ...’

‘You’re a liability out here. And it’s my fault. That’s how it is. Now, if you don’t mind …’

‘Why did you let me come?’

He was taken aback.

‘There must be a reason. You don’t need a photographer out here.’

‘I could ask you the same thing.’

And as irritating as he was Janis knew he had a point.

The troops spent a good part of their day checking guns, canons, tanks and truck filters. The constant outlandish sunrises which at first drove Janis to experiment with shadows spread on golden waves, quickly became the portent to a relentless nauseating heat, blistered lips and a throat so dry it was easier to keep silent. Janis naively believed that once she’d adjusted to living in Cairo, she would never feel as overwhelmed again. But being out here she’d been proven wrong.

Janis found her arduous days made more difficult by Captain Skinner’s shrewd watchfulness. She tried to get some of the soldiers to relax their guard. Davy often cleaned Skinner’s rifle, so she got him to pose with it, slung over his shoulder, looking off centre left.

‘Any news on Tobruk, Davy?’

‘Dunno, love. Only know what I hear.’

‘And what’s that?’

‘That Rommel’s heading towards it. Again.’

Davy gave her a smile. ‘What’s so special about Tobruk, love?’

She eyed him through her lens, opened the aperture setting slightly, pressed the button and captured his canny blue-eyed gaze.

‘It’s the port closest to Malta,’ she said before walking away.

Janis did not want to appear weak, to Skinner or the reluctant division of soldiers he had asked her to photograph. She did not want to seem squeamish with the lack and variety of food and she certainly did not want to appear afraid. Janis had assumed that growing up in Kenya would have made her tougher than most women, but living and travelling in the desert stretched her to unimaginable limits.

Other than Davy, the men were openly derisive of her presence. Having a woman around made them guarded. Janis worked hard to win them over with cigarettes and concerned questions about their loved ones. It worked, slowly, with some of them. She had taken photographs of men cleaning and reloading their tanks. Davy, after his first lot of posing, grew comfortable in front of the camera. He insisted that she take a series of photographs of his water purifying system, which was nothing more than a collection of tins stacked precariously on top of one another, filled with stones and sand. However, the end result of this filter system was surprisingly clean water.

A few days before breaking camp to head towards Knightsbridge, she’d finally captured Sergeant Rogers overseeing sweating men cleaning their Enfield rifles, wrapping them

with sack cloth to protect the mechanisms from sand. They would not have allowed her that kind of access when she first joined. Even now, Skinner would still have to approve the photographs before she sent them to *Libertas*.

It was Corporal Paul Summers, Skinner's signalman, who became Janis's biggest conquest. Openly belligerent, a few days into the journey Janis went to a solitary bog which was covered with sackcloth on one side. While Janis squatted she saw a sand viper threading just beneath the sand towards her. Her heart beating noisily in her throat, her khaki pants twisted around her ankles, hindering any movement.

She gave up and slid backwards on her bare buttocks, but the rippling motion stuck her as strange. It wasn't moving either sideways or towards her. Pulling up her trousers she observed the so-called viper. She grabbed it and tugged and felt a weight on the other end and the movement was quickly followed by muffled laughter. Angry now, she pulled the rope even harder, until an outline pressed against the sackcloth. She stalked around it and found Summers jammed against the material, with the other soldiers laughing hard.

'Bloody idiot.'

She tried to walk quickly away from him, but could only manage was a staggering amble. It marked a turning point and after that Summers couldn't do enough for her.

Chapter 2

Desert Fox, June 1942

Once more the division drove in a caravan following Bedouin tracks. From what Janis could gather they were backtracking from the general direction of Knightsbridge and heading North-East towards El Adem, which was a post below Tobruk. Davy drove. Janis stared at the expanse of powdery gold as far as the eye could see. She closed her eyes, and the rocking motion of the truck translated into the sideways choppy motion of a boat. She opened them and in the split second of her lids lifting she saw an endless sea. Then her vision re-adjusted to the light and they were back to traversing undulating sand. Soft, gilded and blazing hot to the touch. The glare made her head ache.

After a while Skinner stopped them and leapt on to the truck. He merely nodded to Janis before falling asleep and snoring loudly. This amused Davy enormously. Janis took out the camera and carefully positioned it so that she took the photograph from below his chin. She captured the appearance of a double chin, and a half open mouth. The shutter click made him open his eyes briefly and peer at them blearily, before falling back into deep sleep.

'He'll want that photo, luv.'

'I may give it to him if he behaves.'

Davy laughed at this. They trundled along in a comfortable silence for a while, until Davy felt the need to defend his Captain. He whispered, 'He's all right, he is. Braver than some.'

'How long have you known him?' Janis whispered back.

Davy shrugged. 'Dunno. Since '41. Met him coming over on the boat. Thought he was a ponce. 'Till I saw him shoot two jerry spies stone dead without blinking. They'd hired a

houseboat on the Nile. Got radio kit and everything. But they got side-tracked, didn't they.'

Janis was intrigued and it made Davy hesitate, and shift in his seat. 'Why? What do you mean, side-tracked?'

'Cairo prossies.'

Janis couldn't see under the grime on Davy's face, but she suspected he could be blushing.

'Instead of sending their signals back to Berlin they was partying it up on the Nile. He found them and watched them for a week, before they discovered him. Then he shot them. Two, I think.'

'Shut the bloody hell up, Davy.' Skinner's drawl jolted both Janis and Davy.

'Thought you was asleep sir.'

'So did I, until I heard you mouthing off claptrap.'

Davy grinned.

Janis eyed Skinner who stared back at her, grim. 'Something else you'll not be wiring back to *Libertas,* old girl.'

'Of course not. It's true then? German spies living on a houseboat on the Nile?'

'Right under our bloody noses. Being helped by Sadat and his wingmen.'

Janis remembered Mustafa's smile when he said the name Sadat. 'Who is he?'

Skinner shrugged. ‘A revolutionary, whom the Egyptians think will unshackle colonial rule.’

Janis heard them before she saw them, a low drone that got progressively louder. The entire company stopped, leapt off their trucks and slid beneath them just before the Ju Stukas thundered overhead. The bombs pelted down fat and glinting. The men on the crusaders and Grant tanks spun their guns towards the sky and began firing back.

Davy grappled with his rifle, trying to rip the sacking off it, when Skinner roared at him, ‘Leave it, you can do nothing with that, you stupid clot.’

One of the Stukas was hit and weaved all over the sky. Threads of stinking black smoke snaked like a kite tail behind it. Janis grappled with opening the aperture. The plane juddered and eventually plunged down into a dune beyond the horizon. She managed one photograph, of the aeroplane tilted low and distorted by its own demise before it disappeared from sight.

Then the thump and clamour of tanks and the rapid staccato of gunfire punctured her eardrums. Janis gripped the camera so hard that her fingers ached. Her face was covered with sand. When she licked her lips her tongue became thick with salt and grit. It came to her with a penetrating clarity that she may die. A bomb might hit their truck, she would be lit up like an ancient torch, and consumed by fire.

In the acute internal silence borne from shock Janis turned to see Skinner lying on his stomach, staring at her. His eyes were empty. He lay still as an automaton. Panic charged through her. Then he blinked and relief came. It took a few moments before they realised the droning of the planes were receding. They lay motionless until the sound disappeared altogether. Skinner moved quickly. Sliding out from under the truck he began to run, Davy followed.

When Janis stood up she saw the smashed up crusader tank nearby. She moved towards it, clutching her camera. She focussed the lens, adjusted the shutter speed. A soldier hung out of the top, his shirt flapping against his unmoving back. Click. Another

soldier had been thrown clear from the truck behind, his body twisted, and one leg torn off. Click. Janis realised it was Summers. She lowered the camera. Then a compulsion to capture the moment yawned inside her. She lifted the camera and his sightless eyes stared up at Janis through the lens. Nausea ripped through her throat and she staggered away from the tank to retch. As her stomach muscles forced the remains of her bully beef out onto the sand, Skinner grabbed her camera, ripping the spool out of it. By the time Janis finished vomiting the camera lay on the ground next to her. The spool twisted out next to it like an intestine.

'You will not take photographs of dead soldiers, do you understand?' Skinner's fury was cold.

'Do you realise how much I've lost?' Anger overwhelmed Janis.

'We've lost six men, one being a bloody good signalman. We'll probably lose more before we get to Tobruk. Bugger your spool.' He turned away.

Janis began to shake. Davy moved up close to her. 'It's shock, luv. That's all.'

Janis didn't know if Davy meant her shaking or Skinner's rage. She climbed back on to the truck. The soldiers buried the dead. It didn't take long, the graves were shallow. The wind and the sand would finish the job. Eventually Davy and Skinner re-approached and climbed back on to the truck. Janis felt a spontaneous apology pushing up from her gut, but she kept her mouth closed. She eyed Skinner carefully, intending to establish some kind of eye contact. Hoping that it would allow her a way in to comfort him, because that's what she wanted. Skinner stared bleakly ahead.

Davy turned the key and the truck rattled to life. The familiarity of the truck moving forward unlocked a sharp sorrow. Janis turned back to see Summers' torn off limb stretched out across the sand like a finger, pointing in their direction.

Skinner saw it too. 'Eventually you see warnings everywhere. Symbols. It's your imagination. That's all.'

'When it's my time I hope I don't suffer.'

Skinner nodded sincerely. 'I hope so too.'

Davy began to cry, soundlessly at first, then noisily, snot running down over his mouth, his body heaving over the steering wheel. Thrown, Janis put her hand on his arm.

'Davy, it's okay. It's okay.'

'I'm gonna die, Janis. An I only slept with one girl.' Hysteria rising, Davy began to make odd choking sounds.

'You'll get through this, you'll see.'

Davy turned bloodshot eyes towards her. 'How do you know? You don't bloody know, you just sayin that, to make me keep driving.'

'Shut the bloody hell up,' roared Skinner. 'You want to sob like a pansy, let me drive, c'mon.'

Skinner grabbed at the steering wheel with a manic intensity. The truck began to weave. Davy tried pushing him off with an equal amount of grief-fuelled rage as Janis's wrath rippled out of her, 'Stop it, both of you!'

'You keep out of this. It's your fault he's like this to begin with.'

'No, it's not.' sobbed Davy.

'It's not my fault, it's the bloody Germans!' Janis barked at Skinner.

Skinner slumped. As if fatigue had punched him in the diaphragm. He avoided Janis's gaze.

‘Pull over, pull over Davy, I’ll drive.’

‘I’m fine now. Sir.’

Skinner nodded, and stared stiffly ahead. Davy’s grit stained cheeks were streaked with the remains of his tears. Her heart went out to him. That night they didn’t set up camp but hunkered down into their trucks and tanks and fell into an uneasy sleep.

Janis dreamt of a huge expanse of lake stretching before her, the birdsong intense and lyrical. Summers walked towards her, his eye hanging out on his cheek. He smiled. She jolted awake, her heart pounding. Skinner watched her. The coal of his cigarette glowed in the dark. ‘Nightmare?’

‘No. Was I snoring?’

He shook his head and leant back against the car door. ‘You’re all right, Janis. You did better than most.’

It was little more than a whisper, but it hit her like the sound of a gong. ‘Thank you.’

He shrugged, and closed his eyes. She pulled the blanket over her head, and stared sightlessly into the grey of it. After a while Janis felt wedged in her seam of dream and consciousness. Finally the rigid image of Summers began to drain into the sinkhole of her exhaustion until it slipped into nothingness.

When the movement of the truck jolted her eyes open, the first thing Janis saw was a flushed horizon. Happiness made her smile, until the events of the previous day came flooding back. Then guilt replaced lightness. She was alive and Summers wasn’t. Her tongue was stuck to the roof of her mouth. She loosened it and realised that Skinner and Davy were preparing to leave. Janis folded up her blanket and jumped off the truck to go and find somewhere to urinate. When Janis climbed back on to the truck, Davy was sheepish and Skinner had reverted back to his remote state.

They reached the fourth division camp at El-Adem at noon. They could hear distant bombing but couldn't see any Germans, so they progressed forward carefully, sending out scouts every fifty miles. Eventually they arrived at the outskirts of Tobruk. From what Janis could gather the company had four small detachments spaced out right up to the fortressed town. Most were in dug-out trenches surrounded by Crusaders and Grant Tanks. Pitch black oily smoke rose in thick tufts from where Tobruk stood.

Skinner was in a meeting with Lieutenant-General Ritchie, commanding officer of the fourth division. Janis was desperate to join them, but knew she couldn't simply waltz into the commanding officer's tent. Besides, her relationship with Skinner felt uneasy, she was sure he would not be willing to involve her in any kind of high level strategy. 'I need to get in there, Davy. Find out what's going on.'

'It's need to know, luv. Right now, the less I know ...'

'You're traumatised, that's why.'

'No I am bloody well not. Don't you dare go around telling others that either …'

'Davy, I'm sorry…'

'You don't belong here.' He blurted it out then stalked off full of anger and shame.

Janis stared at Ritchie's tent, sagging in the middle, and the centre of all knowledge. She gritted her teeth and walked towards it. When she pulled back the flap and saw Skinner's surprise she almost quailed. But she slid inside as Ritchie surveyed her with deep astonishment.

'A nurse, Captain Skinner?'

Janis held out her scarred and dirty hand. She hoped she produced a wide smile.

'A photographer, for *Libertas* magazine.'

Ritchie was speechless. Skinner glared at her. But Janis ignored him. 'Sir, I apologise for the intrusion, but given that I'm recording events as they happen, on Captain Skinner's orders, I wonder if it's not too impertinent to get an overview.'

Janis held her breath until after a very long beat Skinner nodded to Ritchie.

'I'll vet everything before she sends it off, that's the agreement.'

Janis avoided Skinner's hard stare while Ritchie filled them in.

'We've had to destroy the petrol dump, three million gallons of fuel. The men slashed all the tins with machetes and fired flares into dump. Rommel's pushed past the 32 second army tank brigade.'

'That's confirmed?'

Ritchie nodded.

'There are going to be German tanks in the town by two o'clock, unless we can push them back. But we've been fighting straight out for three days, the men are buggered. I don't know how much longer we can hold out without massive reinforcement.'

Skinner nodded. 'I'll get on the bug. See what we can do, sir.' He left the tent, not bothering to summon Janis. She was left to scurry after him.

'Say not one bloody word, and you can tag along. Understood?'

Janis nodded her compliance to Skinner as they slipped into the communications tent. It was not even an hour later when the black smoke seemed to escalate. From the opening of the tent they could see fire blazing. The sounds of canons punctured the air suddenly,

and then stopped. Janis watched Skinner deftly manipulate the bug and then quickly decode a message from General Klopper.

'We have taken a stand at the North-west end of the fortress. Have begun demolishing all supplies including tanks. Will not surrender.'

Ritchie had joined them and appeared perturbed. Skinner escorted Janis outside the tent and told her in low tones he'd find her later. They were setting up camp for the night and Janis went to set up hers. Once more, Davy came to help her. He avoided her gaze and worked quickly, in silence alongside her. It was an apology, and it made her grateful. There was still at least one person on her side. She crept into her tent and listened to the intermittent exploding of bombs in the distance. She thought of James. She knew he was part of Klopper's division. She wished she could pray, or project an anthem across the desert to thread its way through the black burning smoke and hold him tight.

When Janis finally slept, she dreamt she was riding a horse. She had the sense she'd ridden a long way. She felt the landscape taunt her as if it hid a vicious secret. Someone pulled her off her horse. Janis realised she was being dragged from a dream by rough and urgent hands. Skinner's voice breathed into her ear. 'Tobruk's fallen.'

Janis scrambled from beneath her blankets, still fully clothed in her khaki trousers and shirt. She hurriedly pulled on her boots and grabbed the camera. Sunrise streamed through the thick canvas casting Skinner as an impenetrable outline, light at the edges, murky at the centre.

'We've just heard from Klopper. He's sent an officer to request for terms.'

'He's surrendered?'

'It looks that way. We're waiting for a signal from him. In the meantime you may want to get some photographs.'

Skinner left her tent, and Janis scrambled after him. She noticed that there was no more firing. As she hurried towards Lieutenant- General Ritchie's tent snippets of fear and depression followed her, '… the Gurkhas refuse to surrender ... Good on them ... The second Coldstream guards are fighting too ... I'll bloody well walk back to Cairo...'

Janis slipped into Lieutenant- General Ritche's tent. He looked deeply perturbed. 'Morning, Miss Morgan.'

He turned back to Skinner, 'There must be at least thirty thousand bloody troops based in Tobruk. South Africa's lost at least a third of its forces…'

'What will happen to them?' Janis could not stop herself from interrupting.

'They're POW's now, I don't know where the Jerries will take them.'

'Italy, or Greece, I would imagine,' said Skinner, she felt his sharp-eyed glance.

'You know anyone there, Miss Morgan?' Lieutenant- General Ritchie eyed Janis thoughtfully.

'Do you?' Skinner asked.

Janis swallowed. She had to tell the truth, it was the only way to find out whether James was dead or alive. 'Yes.'

Skinner was mocking. 'You came all this way for your boyfriend, Miss Morgan? '

'James Morgan. Second division South African Army. My brother.'

There was an awkward pause which Janis spoke into. 'I realise there's no way of knowing whether he's dead or alive. I … know that.'

Ritchie eyed Skinner, clearly discomfited. Janis stiffly thanked him and left. She knew that he would not be able to find one man in thirty-thousand now. A few murky spirals weaved in the distance. She lifted her camera, hit the on button, and twisted the aperture. She stopped still, her heels sinking. She stared through the lens at the slow burn of Tobruk.

All day the fortress burned. As German guns and tanks rumbled into the town, the company packed up their tents and got ready to move back to the Al Alamein line. Ritchie told Janis and Skinner that the German army would now have access to over two thousand of the Allies' serviceable vehicles, not to mention the huge supply of stores that Klopper and his men had not managed to destroy.

Once more she clambered on to the truck, to be driven back to British lines by Davy. Once more Skinner got in beside her. Janis took a final photograph of the rough, scrubby desert surrounds of the fallen city. She packed her camera away and said a mental goodbye to James. The most she could hope for was that he'd become a POW and would survive until the end of the war, whenever that would be.

Janis did not know what she felt first, the jolt of the truck falling or the intense heat. She found herself sprawled facedown with her mouth full of sand, and ear-splitting noise. They were being shot at, she could not see from which direction. She sensed rather than saw Davy lying next to her, his breathing shallow, blood trickling from his mouth, his eyes unfocused.

'Davy.' Janis crawled close to him and put her hand on his chest, it slid into viscous blood. She crouched over him, felt his breath expel warm on her cheek. Janis waited and then realised that he had not drawn in another one.

She lifted the camera, without thinking she opened the aperture, adjusted the shutter speed and captured young, earnest and dead Davy. She took another and another. Then she swung the camera up and adjusted the shutter speed and aperture as fast as she could, her heart pounding, pressing the button, reloading pressing the button, capturing

broken bodies, black oily smoke, a soldier running and screaming, a burning tank; the bloody blur of war.

Skinner bloody too, found her and dragged her under the cover of a Grant tank. The Germans did not keep firing for long and eventually they receded. Janis turned to look at Skinner. This time his eyes were closed, the lines around his mouth deeper than she'd ever seen them. Sensing her gaze, his eyes flickered open. The once glossy blue now seemed dark, without reflection. His mouth twisted.

'You want to take a photograph of me in my darkest hour, Morgan? Go ahead.'

Janis held the camera ready as Skinner pulled his knees beneath his chest, and curled almost into a foetal position, his head and shoulders slumping on sand, before lifting his head again.

'We need to bury the dead before we get moving.'

She put down the camera and scrambled after him as he walked towards a collection of corpses. A rasping wind blew.

Janis, Skinner and others tossed loose sand on to Davy and the seven other corpses. They'd been put into standard army issue body bags. A soldier was mapping their resting place. The soldiers all knew it would be a long shot for anyone to come back and claim the remains, but they recorded where all the bodies lay in the desert as a final goodbye. Ritchie said a prayer in staccato tones. And then they were back on the move.

As the truck caravan laboured East Janis stared backwards at the low sandy mound. She felt a subterranean grief loosen inside her.

'Davy was sweet. Really sweet.'

Skinner nodded. 'Damn fine soldier.'

They said nothing after that for a while. Skinner tried to engage in conversation with her. He wanted to know how soon after arriving in Cairo he would get to see all her photographs. Janis answered him when it only became impossible not to. Eventually Skinner lapsed into silence and Janis stared numbly ahead into the desert.

Chapter 3

The Flap, July 1942

Two nights and one sandstorm later they approached Cairo. Her intense relief was smothering. As they drove through Giza past the Pyramids, there were thick swathes of black smoke fanning towards them from the inner city.

'Bloody hell,' cursed Skinner.

There were spirals of smoke, some thicker than others, with flames pushing them upwards, like a murky staircase to the heavens. As Skinner drove closer it appeared as though most of the fires were coming from the tops of buildings, all kinds of them from office blocks to hotels.

'Do you think … the Germans?'

Skinner shook his head. 'We would have heard something.'

'Perhaps, let's … wait until we know …'

'I'm not going to drop you off outside German headquarters, my dear. I'm not that callous.'

Janis closed her eyes, feeling foolish.

Grit mixed with salt from sweat lay thick on her skin. Her eyes burned. Every time she closed her eyes she saw death. It made her fight to stay awake.

'We need to have a look at those photographs of yours.'

'If I can even get to the developing unit, now …'

Skinner smiled. ‘I did not risk my career by taking a woman into the desert for no return. I’ll get you to that unit, if I have to hire a Lysander and fly you there myself.’

Janis recalled the first time Skinner had examined her work. In a small anteroom at Hangover house he’d scrutinised each photograph carefully. She felt as though she was on display. As if the image of the lone Bedouin boy in front of a tattered tent told him about her isolation. A proud Arab father illustrated her confusion about her father. A hospital cross looming over a hunched nurse expressed everything she had ever felt about loss.

He’d seemed affected by them, but as soon as the notion sprang into her head she dismissed it as fanciful. Later, when she recalled his half muttered comment, ‘Painfully strange,’ she wondered whether they had struck some sort of chord in him after all.

‘Why do you want to go out into the desert with a platoon of men, Miss Morgan?’

She knew she would have to answer carefully, he watched her every reaction.

‘Don’t you think we have a duty to capture the war, all aspects of it, not just these?’ She gestured to the formal platoon photographs.

He had smiled then. ‘Even if you capture the very moment of death and we look upon it a hundred years later, I wonder if we’ll recognise the horror of it.’

She’d felt as if he’d removed a plaster off her skin but she couldn’t identify what the wound was.

‘I suspect you’re a cohort of the damned,’ he said.

‘What do you mean?’

‘You’ve not heard the expression? I’m surprised. They’re our lot who’ve come to Africa and can’t tear themselves away.’

She’d never thought of herself as someone who couldn’t leave Africa. Sometimes it was all she thought about. Like a fearful desire. A yearning which she knew would bring countless restrictions within its promise of a comfortable life.

‘It’s dangerous and we don’t know what we’re going to find there. We need a photographer, but it’s our conditions only. Everything you take we approve first.’

Janis did not hesitate before she said yes.

She hadn’t realised that Skinner had already pulled up outside the women’s hostel. His voice drew her back to the present. ‘You need rest, Janis.’

Janis almost fell out of the truck in her desperation to get away from him. Daisy, the nurse she shared a room with had just returned home.

‘Darling, I thought you were dead.’ She flung her clean creamy arms around Janis and shrunk back almost immediately. ‘You smell like twenty-two corpses.

Skinner barked a laugh, as Daisy looked at him through her lashes.

‘Captain Skinner, I do hope you’ve been kind to poor old Janis. She looks awful.’

‘It’s nothing that she hasn’t already done to me, Daisy. Do me a favour, check her hair, Janis I’ll fetch you tomorrow, first thing.’

Without waiting for a reply he ground the truck into gear and trundled off into a mass of people running in different directions, some yelling, others screaming. Daisy led Janis gently up the curved staircase.

‘Darling, it’s madness, Rommel’s coming. Everyone’s destroying all their secret papers. Who would’ve thought we had this many secrets to burn.’

Janis suddenly felt splintered, as if she’d been flung about like a pillow, the insides strewn in different directions. She could only focus on one small thing at a time. As if sensing this Daisy led her gently to their bedroom, and slipped out to run her a bath.

Janis slid down to the floor, too dirty to sit on her bed. She hauled out the camera and rolls of film and packed them carefully into her old leather storage briefcase. She rubbed the lens of the camera clean. There were hardened beads of blood on it. Davy. Grief thick as tar threatened to overwhelm her. She guided her mind away from the broken image of him. She focused on putting the camera away, concentrating so hard she could see the scuffed parts of her leather bag in minute detail.

‘My father gave me this briefcase.’ Janis told Daisy. She didn’t at first register Daisy’s polite smile and careful gaze. ‘He used it when he travelled to various coffee farms. I sometimes rode with him when he went. If I was well behaved. He always said I was terribly well behaved.’

Janis couldn’t quite remember whether Daisy had shifted the briefcase strap out of her grasp before mentioning the bath again or not. There was some sort of slurring of time, like a drunken stumble and then Janis found herself walking the length of the shining grey corridor accompanied by Daisy’s relentless chatter. For the first time Janis gratefully realised it must be a deliberate ploy, to pull her away from the rawness of her recent experience.

In the bathroom, Janis slipped into the scalding water and sunk entirely below the surface. She blew bubbles up towards the rippling face of Daisy, peering with concern back at her through the water. The tightness of water on her eardrums shut out the world, made her close her eyes and float briefly in the womb of the bath. It was only when she grew desperate for air that she broke the surface of the water. Hot water ran down her body in dirty rivulets. Daisy took a big sponge and scrubbed Janis’s shoulders, back and arms, accompanying this with another relentless monologue.

‘My God darling, you’re dreadfully dirty if you don’t mind me saying, we’ll have to fatten you up on eggs and pastries. I believe the desert is hideous. I nursed a sergeant with a wooden leg, they had to send him back because the sand kept on getting in between the wooden leg and his stump, it gave him the most dreadful infection. They almost had to do another amputation. But thanks to my tender skills …’

Daisy scrubbed Janis’s hair with shampoo until her scalp burnt. After a few dunks in the water, Janis convinced Daisy to leave her alone and wash the rest of her aching body in peace. She only got out of the bath when the water grew too cold for her to remain. Wrapping herself in a dressing gown she made her way back to her room where Daisy combed out the tangles in her hair and inspected it for lice. There were a few, so Daisy poured baby oil on her hair and combed it out again and again, the action deeply soothing.

The next thing Janis knew hot light streamed into the room, and Daisy prattled while presenting her with soft boiled eggs.

‘How was Max? Did he seduce you? I couldn’t wait to know but you looked so shattered last night?’

Janis began to laugh, a hard and terrible bunching of muscles that hurt her stomach. Daisy clasped her by the shoulders.

‘It’ll pass soon, its shock.’

Janis shook her head as the laughter subsided. She noticed that the dresser was blindingly white. The costume jewellery that hung over the edge of an open drawer was garish. The cotton sheets, thick and milky their texture soft and hot. The heat made her sweat. Daisy’s blonde hair stuck to her flushed face. Suddenly Janis hated summer.

‘Any news of James?’

'Tobruk's fallen. I'm sure you know. If James is still alive he's been captured by the Germans.'

Then she buckled into Daisy's neck and stopped fighting her tears.

Much later, after she'd woken up after another deep sleep, Janis felt strong enough to get dressed and go downstairs to the communal living room. Daisy had left for work a few hours ago. She'd left a note that Skinner had come to collect her but Daisy had told him to come back later. This propelled Janis into action. She called her driver, Mustafa, to ask him to take her to the mobile developing unit, and as she waited noticed that all the women were carrying small attaché bags with them. The women were mostly FANY's or RAF recruits. 'We all have them, love, a change of clothes and a toothbrush. In case we have to get out quickly when Rommel arrives.'

'He'll never get past our boys, surely?

The nurse shrugged. 'Auchinleck's moved into the desert, fat lot that'll do. So, there's a good chance that he may.'

Mustafa arrived soon after to collect her and seemed depressed by the advent of Rommel. 'Why all this in Cairo? First the British, then the Germans. First we must make Pimms, what next, their beer?'

'I can't see how they'll get through, Mustafa. I met some very fine soldiers in the desert. They'll protect us all.'

'It's time Egyptians protect Egyptians.' He punched his hooter at some English women, and a throng of what appeared to be Jewish refugees who were scurrying towards the railway station. Janis remembered Davy's story of Skinner's capture of the two German soldiers on the house-boat, as well as the mention of Sadat, and wondered whether this was the primary source of Mustafa's irritation. As they drove past the British Residency, Mustafa had to put his lights on. They both coughed through the fog of smoke.

‘All this burning, the British have gone mad, Miss Janis. Mad.’ Mustafa shook his head.

As they turned the corner they drove past a queue of soldiers, nurses, and civilians. The line went right the way up to the front doors of the Barclay’s Bank. This enraged Mustafa even more.

‘Now they’re taking all the money out of Cairo. Why don’t they stay and fight the Germans?’

‘I’m sure they will. The allies are not going to abandon Cairo.’ Janis hoped this would be the case.

‘General Auchinlek’s hiding in the desert. What does that say to you? They must release Sadat. He will protect his own people.’

Janis nodded. Mustafa’s newfound revolutionary patriotism unsettled her. She felt relieved when they finally arrived at the mobile photographic units set up just at the northern edge of the old city. All press photographers used them and she had called ahead and booked her slot.

Entering the red tinted darkness was like arriving at the family home. Unlooping the first roll of film carefully she developed it and then slid it beneath the photographic enlarger to study the images. She grimaced when she scanned through the ones of the desert. They felt amateurish. She slid the roll on until she came to the first group pictures of the company.

There was the one of Summers laughing at Davy as he fell when setting up the tent. She kept pulling the film. When she came to the portraits of Davy a sliver of grief twisted inside. He looked so debonair, with his missing teeth and his quirky all-knowing look. There was no point in crying she told herself, no point at all.

Janis immersed herself in the reddened gloom, studying images through the enlarger and selecting images to print. Time slipped away with the constant dipping of paper into

developer, cleaner, fixer. The pungent chemical fumes which brought the acrid taste to the back of her throat. The dense heat and the suffocating stillness accompanied her on a long walk in a familiar garden. She knew every scrabbled pathway, every hidden hole her foot might trip into. Before she knew it, she had spent at least four hours in the unit and had developed three rolls of film. Skinner banged on the door and called crisply through the blacked out window.

'Morgan, you've missed your deadline, let me in.'

'You leave her alone, you can't open the door, until she says so.'

Janis was delighted at Mustafa's ferocity, and let the two men bicker for a while before she called at Skinner through the closed door.

'I'll be finished at five. I'll be ready to show you all the prints then.'

'Right, then Hangover house this evening? No more excuses.'

'I'll be there,' she promised, 'I have *Libertas* on tenterhooks.'

She turned back and slid in the final roll of film. And there they were, the images she'd been dreading. An unseeing Davy who stared at her, no missing teeth exposed now. Other nameless bodies cocooned in smoke, their mouths stretched open too wide. A close up of a soldier's exposed neck, the pallid strip between the sunburn of his upper back and hairline. A thin trickle of blood cut across it. A hand semi clenched in death, bitten nails, dirty forever. And Skinner, smeared in blood, stripped of everything except desolation. The landscape shots of broken bits of men scattered across the grainy expanse of a vast no man's land.

Suddenly the photographs of the men living their daily lives felt like an abomination when she compared them to the hurriedly captured images of death. A hole opened inside her chanting a relentless refrain: why. James. Janis knew she had to cling to the

memory of James poking her upper arm in that peculiarly gentle way. Hope that the collected fragments of her childhood could in some way keep him alive.

She did very little altering of the original images. She shifted the aperture ring to increase some of the light. She moved them gently in developer, with her tweezers. As the chemical rippled over the paper and the images emerged, Janis felt the usual combination of impatience, hope and irritation. Then she rinsed them, like a new born babies, and hung them out to dry.

By the time she could hold them a profound knowledge of what she had achieved felt like a tender glue for her blown up world. She'd entered her darkroom like a portal into a new world. She had discovered a corrosive elasticity to her imagination, like the smudging of a pencilled pony, into a rough but evocatively realised corpse.

She fumbled with the photographs, uncomfortably elated, hurriedly sliding them into a folder. One fell from the pack. She reached down and picked it up. It was the image of an unconscious Skinner. Caught at the deliberately unflattering angle with his double chin and thin, turned down mouth it initially made her smile. But as she continued to stare she was left with an overwhelming sense of a man who was so tired by death he had simply slumped into sleep in order to escape it. Janis held the photograph in both hands, about to rip it up. She didn't understand why she didn't, why she slid it into the bulging folder intending to take it with her.

Janis switched on the light and readjusted to the burning fluorescent brightness before asking Mustafa to take her to Hangover house.

Chapter 4

Hangover House, July 1942

Mustafa pulled up in front of Tara. It looked more like its dilapidated nickname, Hangover house, without the blanket of night or candles to mask peeling pink paint. Abbas, the butler, opened the door to greet her, and managed a smile. 'Good evening Miss Morgan. Captain Skinner is expecting you. Please come in.'

Abbas escorted Janis down the wide, cool passage and into the lounge. Zofia stood to greet her from the depths of a plush Sanderson linen sofa. An ivory cigarette holder held a burning cigarette hung at the very end, in between her long fingers. A mongoose was curled up on one fat sofa arm.

Janis had first encountered Countess Zofia Tarnowksa, a Polish aristocrat, at a house party. She was one of the most beautiful women Janis had ever seen. Tall, slim and brunette, she'd worn a midnight blue sequined dress and stood utterly still in the middle of a vast ballroom. Janis had had fleeting glimpses of her as she'd been concealed and then revealed by walzing couples. She'd worn a tiny fur stole, which on closer inspection moved. Janis had then realised they were two pet Mongoose.

'Countess Zofia Tarnowksa, Polish aristocrat.' Daisy had whispered. 'It's an open secret that she's living here with a fictitious chaperone; she's the only woman who lives here, the rest,' Daisy had waited for the full effect before delivering the rest in doomsday tones, 'are all soldiers.'

'Darling, welcome back. I could not believe it when Max told me he'd dragged you off into the desert. It's a wonder you survived.'

Janis grinned. 'It's certainly not the luxury I'm used to.'

A hacking laugh accompanied this. Janis realised there was a man slumped into a deep armchair, in an RAF uniform. An Enfield rifle slung between his legs.

'Marek, meet Miss Janis Morgan, you're a … photographer?'

Janis nodded and Sofia continued, 'Max dragged her into the desert, on some mission.'

Marek turned to face Janis and she could see immediately that he and Zofia were brother and sister. He had the same gaunt beauty.

Abbas informed Janis in flat tones that Master Captain Skinner was in the bathroom. The Countess waved a languid hand, 'Go and find him there, my dear, otherwise you'll wait all night.'

Janis was sure the amazement spread over her face like a stain. 'Uh, sorry, but …'

Abbas was clearly used to the strange order, for he said, 'They meet in there all day, draw war pictures on the walls.'

Sofia seemed amused. Abbas escorted Janis up the curved staircase. When she got to the top he rapped three times on the bathroom door and glided down a wide mosaic passageway without saying a word. A sweating man sporting only army trousers flung open the door as a huge puff of steam blew out behind him. Janis caught a glimpse into the bathroom. There were at least five men all without their shirts on peering intently through a hazy fog at the white tiles on the wall. Some of them smoked and held champagne glasses. Skinner traced something on the tiles in the steam.

'The enemy lines are a maximum of sixteen thousand yards, you're looking at fifteen to twenty rounds a minute…'

As the man in front of her yelled loudly, 'Good God, ingénue alert, chaps.'

A flushed Skinner approached Janis with a concave, shining chest. 'Chaps, meet Janis Morgan, war correspondent. Miss Morgan.'

He slid out of the bathroom pulling a shirt over his clammy skin. Janis followed him back down the stairs, down the same wide hallway past the living room and into a study.

'Have you managed to get some rest?' Skinner quickly buttoned up his shirt. The damp spots on his skin creating dark patchy marks.

'Yes, thank you.'

And so it went on. They swopped banalities which hung between them like ineffectual bits of cloth trying to cover nakedness. She noticed that while he was cleaner he didn't look any less gaunt. She wondered if she had the same aura of weariness as he did. Probably not. This was her first desert trip, and was more likely to be his third. Their small talk petered out. Janis was sure it was because she'd simply stopped talking. She hauled out her photographs and spread them on the large oak desk. Skinner examined each one closely. The group shots of the company, the setting up of the camp, digging trenches, and the various portraits of the men. Smoke spiralling up from the fortressed Tobruk in the distance. Skinner eyed her sardonically. 'There are none of me.'

Janis smiled. 'There is one.'

She gave him the photo she'd taken of him sleeping. She knew then as she handed it over that it was a mistake. He stared at it.

'At first I intended it to be a comic image. But it somehow didn't turn out that way.' She began to gabble.

Skinner became still. She began to panic. Finally he made eye contact with her. His expression was bleak, like she'd shown him his own beating heart. She reached for the photograph. 'I'm sorry, I shouldn't have …'

He tore it in half.

'No!'

'Where are the others?'

She felt like a gutted fish. She stared into his eyes, the irises huge from booze. Somehow exhaustion never seemed to leave him. She took out the remaining folder. She spread them out on the table, her images of war. She knew he would veto them, say it wasn't the right time for them to be published now, she was going to find a way. She'd promised herself that much. Skinner hunched over them, his face cast in shadow by the

overhead light. He spent a long time looking at each one. Eventually he sat down. The light slid down his sunburnt face, deepening the lines on either side of his mouth.

When he came to Davy, he picked up the photograph almost tenderly. His lips curled in on themselves, like he was clamping them together to stop them from trembling.

'I'm sorry. About earlier,' he said. 'I don't know what came over me.'

She felt the urge to weep. She nodded.

'You can't publish these, but they're very fine. We'll want them of course. The negatives too. It's a record.'

'Someone's got to know,' she said. 'If not now, then after the war.'

'Perhaps.'

Marek burst into the room holding a drink.

'Marek, we're busy, old boy.'

'That's all right. So am I.' his tongue sounded too thick for his mouth. He stared at the desk, the photograph of Davy lay on top of the pile and he lunged for it before Skinner could stop him.

'What's this?'

'Marek, give that back to me.' Skinner was firm, but Marek scowled at Janis.

'You took this? What for?'

'At my request.' Skinner interceded.

'You think this is funny?'

'No, I don't. I think it's tragic that a boy this young is dead.' Janis hoped the grief lining her throat wasn't going to reveal itself.

Skinner walked up to Marek and firmly took the photograph from his hands. He put a hand on the man's shoulder.

'Why don't you go back downstairs, eh?'

‘I want it.’

‘What? No. They belong to the British army.’

Marek stared at Janis, his gaze unfocused. After a beat he turned on his heel and left.

‘I’m sorry.’ Skinner said after the man had left. ‘He’s troubled.’

‘Has he been in the desert?’

Skinner nodded. ‘He’s on desk duty now. It’s driving him even more crazy.’

Janis packed her photographs away.

‘Janis, go downstairs and get Abbas to pour you a drink. I’ll join you shortly.’

Janis handed him the photographs and went downstairs. She was filled with an intense longing to leave. She decided she would. She would collect her bag in the living room, make her excuses and go. She had delivered almost all the photographs. She would have to see Captain Skinner one more time and then never again if that’s how she wanted it. She went back down to the sitting room and Marek was hunched in the same deep chair. Sofia sat on the sofa, stroking a sleeping mongoose. Janis could feel Marek’s gaze on her the moment she entered the room.

‘Zofia, she photographed dead people.’ Marek sneered at her.

‘How brave,’ said Zofia uncertainly.

‘How bloody disrespectful,’ roared Marek, hurtling to his feet. With a shock Janis realised that he had a rifle clutched in his hand.

‘Marek sit down and give me your gun,’ ordered Skinner, who had just entered. ‘What the hell are you doing with it, anyway?’

‘I think he found it in the garage.’ Zofia did not seem to be as perturbed as Skinner. Until Marek hoisted the weapon up and pulled back the firing bolt, the rifle pointed at the ceiling.

‘Darling, please…’ His sister’s plea seemed to come from very far away.

Janis shifted backwards towards the door. She stood on Skinner's foot, who gripped her upper arms and murmured into her ear, 'Careful, now. Don't alarm him.' Her mouth was dry, and even though the fan was swirling at top speed she broke out into a sweat. Her stomach clenched and her fear magnified everything. Marek was going to shoot them all because of her photograph of Davy.

'There is no respect for the dead. Isn't that what they say? Well it's about time we fucking showed them some.' Marek stared at her, the rifle waving slightly in his grip.

'Say sorry.' Muttered Skinner still holding her arms.

'I'm sorry, if I've offended you. It's not that I don't respect them, or what they've sacrificed. Someone needs to know what soldiers have to endure. It's a record.'

The shot momentarily deafened her. Everything was rendered utterly silent and still. Then the crystal shards from the vestige of the chandelier rained down. Skinner pushed her to one side and she fell to her knees, which pressed into splinters and began to bleed. Skinner grabbed the rifle from Marek's limp hands, as he stared up at the ceiling stunned. As if he didn't realise he'd pulled the trigger. The bullet had hit the top of the chandelier, sending it slamming into the parquet floor. Zofia began to shake and she clutched her Mongoose which made an urgent squeaking sound. Skinner took the remaining bullets out of the rifle as Abbas careered in and skidded on broken glass.

'Abbas, take the Count upstairs will you. And give him something to drink.'

'I'll help you, come darling.' Zofia led her stupefied brother out of the room, followed by Abbas.

'You look all cut up.' Skinner eyed Janis ruefully. She laughed. She knew it would turn into hysteria and then something more awful if she didn't try and stop. She tried but it continued, the tears skirting very close to the surface. Skinner steered her out of the lounge. She swayed down the wide and high ceilinged corridor as he took her arm. He opened a small bathroom door and gently placed her down on the closed toilet seat. He took a wad of toilet paper, dampened it and carefully lifted the crystal bits off her face, neck and shoulders. He wiped her bloody knees clean. He put some ointment on them and as gentle as he was, it burnt, and she gritted her teeth. He studied her clinically.

'You'll be all right. Small nicks here and there, nothing too serious. Are you all right?'

Janis nodded. 'I need to get home.'

She felt like she was going to splinter if she didn't leave. Janis pushed past him, and rushed back into the living room, once more. She searched hastily for her bag.

She pulled back a cushion and unearthed another Mongoose which stood up, startled at the sight of her.

Skinner entered the room. 'Janis, I've had it on good authority that the Second South African Division has been interned and taken to Italy.'

She sat down suddenly. Whatever she expected him to say it wasn't this. James. She couldn't frame the question. Yet she knew she had to had to. 'Do you know if James Morgan was one of the prisoners of war?'

'Yes, he was. Your brother is alive. I don't know any more than that.'

Skinner walked to the drinks trolley and slapped melting ice into smeared crystal glasses.

'I know that this is blunt. Time is hugely important right now. We need someone in Johannesburg, and it must be a woman. A man will never get anywhere, not one of us at any rate. With a woman at least we have a chance. You'll be well paid.'

Confusion slowed her down. 'Paid?'

Skinner threw her a smile limned with heartfelt warmth. 'You were involved in two instances of battle. On both occasions you remained calm and showed forbearance. The second instance you risked your life to obtain photographs. You're also self-contained and discreet.'

'Do you want me to take photographs?'

He handed her a drink, and she gripped it hard. 'In a manner of speaking. You could be a portrait photographer as your cover.'

‘My cover? For what?’

Skinner slid into an armchair and balanced a long ankle on a skinny knee. ‘You’d report to me. We have some people that need to be infiltrated and watched. You wouldn’t be in any danger.’

Incredulity began to bubble within. ‘You want me to … spy?’

He stared at her, his expression sombre. ‘There would be some danger, actually. But you’d have training. And me, for back up. Always.’

‘Who do you work for? The British Government?’

‘SOE, Mediterranean. Even though you’re shy, you’re pretty enough to lure a potential target if needs be. You would need some training in this regard.’

Janis gritted her teeth. ‘Right. So prostitution is also a possibility?’

Skinner looked awkward. ‘Well, no, of course not. All I’m saying is that women have an advantage we blokes don’t when it comes to getting information.’

Janis stood up abruptly. ‘No thanks.’

He seemed taken aback. ‘What about your brother?’

‘What about him?’

‘This could be a way to get him out of Italy.’

‘Is that possible? You could do that?’

Skinner nodded sincerely. ‘I would do my best.’

‘But no guarantees?’

‘Well, no. Of course not. One cannot guarantee anything in a war.’

All the suppressed anger and grief that she’d contained snaked through her. ‘You cruel, lying bastard.’

Then she left.

Later, after Janis had unpacked the strange events of the afternoon to Daisy she began to feel like she was finally approaching normal. Daisy’s eyes were the size of flying goggles. ‘I knew wretched Max was a spy. What else?’

Janis shrugged.

‘Nothing. Other than he knows where James is.’

‘You’re sure?’

‘Why wouldn’t I be?’

‘He clearly said James was interned in a camp in Southern Italy.’

‘Then you have nothing to worry about, at least you know he’s alive. In fact he may better off than us lot with Rommel about to invade. Are you sure you’re telling me everything, you look a bit peaky?’

‘I’m fine. Tired, that’s all.’

Daisy’s knowing look made her feel guilty about lying. She couldn’t tell her anymore it would just sound too absurd. She wanted to accept the fact that James was interned with the same prosaic ability that Daisy did, but she couldn’t. The thought of it conjured up all sorts of images which haunted her. James being beaten by guards, tortured, starved. There were stories beginning to filter through from various reporters she would meet at the Gezira club about the Gestapo and their treatment of captured Allies,

whispered commentary on interrogations comprising of drowning and beatings. The thought alternatively enraged her and made her feel physically ill.

Janis spent the following week in her darkroom developing and processing the remaining images of her desert trip to send to *Libertas*. That Mustafa dropped her off at the mobile unit in the morning and collected her in the evening provided a thin thread of normality amid the chaos. There were consistently huge intakes of soldiers flooding the hotels and residences. Refugees and others jamming up the platforms of the train station, persistently trying to get out of Cairo. Max came to see her once more at the mobile unit. He seemed unfazed by their last encounter and leaned against the unit lazily absorbing the sweltering sun while he lit a cigarette.

'Thought any more about my offer?'

She didn't know what to say. He smiled at her as he blew smoke through his nose and mouth.

'It's not massively unlikely Janis. More women spy than you think.'

'I have no reason to want to spy, Max. No reason at all.'

Janis completed all her photographs that day. It was that same night that she fell into her first real deep sleep since she'd returned from the desert. She dreamt of Nakuru.

They sat on the front porch as the sun set. James scraped bits of bark off a thin stick, sharpening one end to make a spear. Cicadas chattered busily, interrupting the hoarse song of frogs. Beyond the rash of straggling bush something moved. They strained to see, it was merely minutes before the tiny lights began to dance across the lawn. A thin line at first and then they scattered rose and spread, skipping points of sparkle. Fairies, she yelled. James turned to her and grinned. Glow worms, he said, squiggly brown things that only look good after dark, like you, monster. Fireflies, she said, worms can't fly, stupid.

Janis woke in the darkness, momentarily confused by the vividness of the dream. She lay awake until dawn, Daisy snored softly in the opposite bed. Eventually, when it was light enough to see she got up, got dressed and telephoned Mustafa to take her to Hangover house.

Chapter 5

T.M.E – Cairo, August 1942

The morning air was already burning hot and Hangover house seemed deserted other than a measured scuffing sound coming from the garage. Janis knocked on the front door, but no one answered. She skirted around the side towards the half open garage, cautiously approaching the thudding. A big, misshapen shape stood resplendent in the gloom. Hewn out of plywood and corrugated iron it looked as if it had been flattened and repainted to resemble a tank. Next to it a man, wearing flying goggles and overalls was carefully applying screws to two separate strips of corrugated iron, to hold them together.

'Hallo?'

The banging stopped. The man ripped off his goggles.

'Hallo Marek.'

'Who're you?'

'Janis, you met me about a week ago …' you almost killed me, 'Max's friend.'

'Yes.' He stared; his eyes were widely spaced, like Zofia's with the same sharp cheek bones beneath. His collarbones protruded whitely against the stained khaki of his overalls.

'I didn't know you were a …. Sculptor.'

'I'm not.' He turned back and wiped dust off the large mass.

'What is it?'

'A tank.'

'Lovely.'

'It's for Rommel.' He slumped against it, grabbing a glass of water, gulping it as a few drops splashed and settled in the hollows of his collar bones. 'Very hush hush, I

shouldn't even be talking about it. Build fake tanks, put them in the desert then the Jerries will bomb those not our blokes. Pure genius.' He smiled warmly at her.

'My sister thinks it'll still make me feel part of it. I can't fly anymore, so …'

'You must miss flying. Is your sister inside?'

'Only Max.'

Marek picked up a hammer, it pulled down on his arm, making a spindly muscle bunch as he tried to lift it.

'Trickery's what's going to win this war. Making decoys like these will save lives.' He announced this like it was a thought through strategy given to him directly from Churchill's lips. The whites of his eyes gleamed in the shadows. She'd already taken out the camera, she held it up.

'Do you mind?'

'Be delighted.'

He leant against his contraption, pulled his goggles down and held his hammer in a flamboyant pose. She captured the outline of a masked man with an indistinct weapon against a contorted outline.

'Thank you so much.'

He turned back to his masterpiece, stuck a screwdriver into a groove and lowered the hammer down on it. She watched him for a moment, then turned and walked towards the house. Skinner himself opened the door, looking crumpled, as if he'd just woken up.

'Sorry to bother, I'm bringing you the last of the photographs.'

She handed them over and he took them without comment. He leaned against the doorframe, opened the envelope and shuffled through them. He gave her a smug smile,

'Thank you. This concludes our arrangement, I'd say.'

She could not bring herself to tell him she was considering his offer. So she turned and walked back up the pathway, confusion jangling in her head.

'Changed your mind yet?'

'I want more information.'

He nodded, 'Come inside.'

In the cool of the living room, she sat wedged in between Zofia's sleeping Mongooses as Skinner detailed what she would need to consider. 'A month of training. I'm assuming you'd have a head start on other women, knowing how to use a rifle, used to a bit of the rough life Then we'd place you in Johannesburg…'

'Hang on, what kind of rough?'

'How to set up surveillance, you'd need to learn some code. Summers told me you knew basic Morse, how to kill with your bare hands.'

'How to kill with my bare hands….' She felt like she was back in the garage staring at Marek wearing goggles in the gloom, except he was laughing maniacally.

Skinner stared back at her, 'At present there are a fair amount of women in occupied France and other countries, all of whom can do anything with dynamite except eat it. Killing with one's bare hands is not an insurmountable challenge.'

'Tell me about my brother.'

That irritatingly playful smile appeared again.

'He's interned in a camp in Southern Italy.'

'So you said.'

'He's being well looked after. They all are. The Italians are amenable to the Geneva convention.'

'How do you know?'

He simply stared at her as if the question was rhetorical. 'You will not see your brother until after the war that much I can tell you.'

'But you said …'

'I said anything is possible. I made no promises.'

'You need to make your decision based on whether you believe the SOE is a worthy cause.'

'Do you?'

Skinner shrugged. 'There's the usual infighting, one man's club against the other, none of this will ever need to concern you. You'll be trained, flown to Johannesburg, and report to me exclusively.'

'What would I be expected to do there?'

'Position yourself in society so that you meet people. Keep your eyes and ears open, send reports, that sort of thing.'

'That's all?'

He nodded. 'We usually place bods where they have an in-depth knowledge of the place and people they're reporting on. We know you spent summers in Johannesburg with your grandparents. We know you speak some Afrikaans as well as German.'

'So learning to kill with my bare hands and eating dynamite, that's just for…?'

'In case. What kind of men would we be, allowing women to spy without equipping them with the necessary tools?'

She stood up and turned away from his obvious manipulations, conflicted.

'One of our subs was bombed by a U-boat off the South African coast. Most of the men on board were goners. The Nazis already have their grubby hands on any group with a grudge against the empire. Smuts is all right, but can he contain his ilk? That remains to be seen.'

'You think the Afrikaners would back the Nazis? Haven't loads of them already volunteered for the war effort?'

'Some of them have already come out publicly in support. There's already a lot of activity in German South-West Africa. South Africa's not a country we can afford to lose.'

'Why me?'

'Because you have South African grandparents. Because you're brave, and I trust you.'

Shock kept her silent, but he appeared to be sincere. This made her more confused.

'My brother …'

'It's out of my hands, Morgan. The best I can offer is consistent news on his wellbeing. It's not nearly enough, I'm afraid.'

It felt better than nothing. Taking photographs for *Libertas* had assured her more work and a growing reputation. But she would not be able to go back into the desert without Skinner, she knew. If she said no to Skinner she would lose access to all she'd gained. She was tired of Cairo, the heat, which made her too numb to think, the dust and the chaos of uncertainty. Marek entered, showered in dust, the outline of his goggles a black mark around the whiteness of his broken eyes. He smiled at her cheerfully and made his way upstairs.

'What's he doing, Skinner?'

Skinner smiled conspiratorially, 'Classified information, old girl.'

She put her head back on the sofa and took her time in studying his worn face, with the guarded eyes which suggested a ruthless spirit. He grinned at her, 'Planning a photograph?'

She laughed. 'I already have more than I need.'

'Clandestine life is tough. We'll do everything to keep you safe; there are no guarantees of course. If you ever found yourself in the hands of the Germans, you would be on your own.'

Her final days in the desert came back to her, the low thundering of the Stukas, Davy's empty eyes, Tobruk burning like a sacrifice. The detachment of lying in sand alongside death, it was less of a decision and more of an exhalation of pent up confusion, knowing the next in breath would bring clarity and relief.

'I'll do it.'

‘Why?’ he snapped the question at her fiercely.

‘You’ve just spent the past ten minutes telling me to do this.’

He shook his head, ‘You need to know exactly why you’re doing it. One day you may find yourself in a situation where all you have left to hold on to is the reason for choice you made.’

‘For my brother. For Davy.’

Skinner nodded. ‘Four shillings a day, danger pay. That’s over and above your weekly wage. We’ll cover anything else you need. Brace yourself for the TME, old girl.’

‘When do we leave?’

‘Tomorrow. From now on, this is all classified. Daisy or anyone else cannot know.’

‘What do I tell her?’

‘Learn to lie Janis, one day it may save your life.’

Part 2
The Blood of Martyrs
Chapter 6

Operating in the urban environment, often at the heart of enemy-occupied territory requires a particular set of skills, and particular character and nerve. If you are arrested by the Gestapo, do not assume that all is lost; the Gestapo's reputation has been built up on ruthlessness and terrorism, not intelligence. They will always pretend to know more than they do and may even make a good guess, but remember that it is a guess; otherwise they would not be interrogating you.

SOE Handbook.

T.M.E. August 1942

'But darling I thought you hated the desert?'

Janis stuffed clothes into a small suitcase while Daisy blinked continuously against the bright early light.

'I do. But this is a good opportunity for me, I can't pass it up.'

'I don't understand why you'd want to go back into the desert after all that happened to you, especially now Rommel's almost on our doorstep.'

Janis jammed the last of her possessions into the suitcase and pressed hard down on it. 'I'll be all right. Besides, Rommel's been knocking on our door for weeks now.'

Daisy sighed. 'I'm exhausted from the waiting. Rommel hauling me off to a POW camp would be almost be a welcome change.'

Janis knew what Daisy meant. Soldiers huddled in corners. Their whispers were a relentless scratching worry. At least by going for training, she felt like she was doing something useful. Daisy opened her arms to Janis. Janis hugged her, full of regrets. For all her eccentricities Daisy had been a good friend. It felt wrong to be lying to her. Daisy flopped back into bed. 'Look after yourself darling, watch out for that Captain Skinner.'

Janis hauled her suitcase to the door, 'I'm not going with Captain Skinner.'

Daisy eyed her shrewdly, 'any idea of when you'll be back?'

'I'll keep you posted.'

Janis felt uncomfortable as she smiled and left the room. But as she made her way down the grey corridor she felt a lightness grow inside her. A door had opened to a new and exciting future. All she had to do was step through it. Johannesburg's modern buildings had always had held appeal for her. She remembered visiting her grandparents in their light-filled spacious flat that overlooked a park.

The routine of summer days. She and James being taken to Mr. Mohammed the ice cream vendor with his sticky vanilla ice-creams. Her grandfather always allowed her to pay. Ambling up a wide street with ice-cream dipping down her arm equalled happiness. Her grandfather was a softly spoken and gentle man, so unlike her father. James blossomed under his care and spent every waking hour with him. This time around she would be pretending to be someone else, she would be lying to people. Would a spy ever be able to amble down wide streets without a care in the world again. Janis's mind veered around the word like a skittish rabbit. The notion felt unreal, as if she was stepping into another life.

Skinner was waiting for her in his ramshackle Morris truck, sweating in the early morning burn. 'Last chance to change your mind?'

She smiled, and shook her head. They drove through Heliopolis, and about six miles out of the lavish suburb was a small collection of buildings and a few aeroplane hangars next to an airstrip. Skinner drove the Morris beyond these before stopping. He walked towards an open expanse of desert, and then disappeared. Puzzled, she followed and found a small hole with a ladder that disappeared into darkness.

'Follow me.'

His voice echoed eerily upwards.

She climbed carefully down the narrow, uneven ladder rungs to where he was waiting. They walked through a tight tunnel which ended in a door. He swung it open and she and found herself in cavernous space with a huge bank of radio operators, mostly women. They were wearing earphones and deciphering messages. One of them turned to Skinner and purred.

'Max, darling, back so soon?'

'Missed you too, old girl.'

Janis felt her sense of stepping into another world sharply increase. The room was dim. The women worked with a sense of purpose. As if their work had importance and meaning. It felt glamourous. She knew that it shouldn't feel like that. But the rows of radio operators made her feel excited. She too, was going to become a part of something secretive. She followed Skinner through another winding rabbit tunnel until they arrived at an office. A somewhat dishevelled woman opened the door, and she stepped inside.

'Welcome to Telecommunications Middle East, Max has told me about you, my dear.'

She closed the door behind them; her voice was low and hoarse. Skinner grinned almost foolishly. Janis held out her hand for the woman to shake. She wondered why she wasn't in uniform, when it was clearly an air force base. The woman's handshake was cool and firm, but her dress distracted Janis from noticing anymore. It was a light, floral organza, almost too formal for her surroundings.

'Dorothy Masters, head of the finishing school, we call it that because after you've learnt all the horrible things like sleeve guns and how to explode a rat, or pretend to have TB, you come to me for lessons on make-up and fake moustaches.'

Janis found something about the woman peculiar. 'Thank you for considering me.'

'Max says you're a good photographer, that'll certainly come in handy where you're going,' a winsome smile, 'if you pass your interrogation, of course.'

'I plan to do my best, and see what happens.' Her sense of curiosity escalated. She suddenly understood, and before she could stop herself she blurted out, 'you're a man.'

Dorothy's eyebrows rose as Max began to laugh.

'I beg your pardon, I'm terribly sorry …'

Dorothy ripped her blonde hair off and revealed a short dark head of hair slicked back and covered with a net. Her voice deepened and she laughed.

'Well spotted. Duncan Moore, SOE trainer. You're observant, Miss Morgan. You'll report for duty first thing tomorrow morning, four am. Wear trousers, and bring a hat.'

He hauled his dress up around his thighs and placed large feet in high heeled shoes on his desk, khaki shorts peeping through the petticoat. He picked up a pipe and began pressing tobacco deeply into it.

'Max, get her signed up and come straight back.'

He lit his pipe and inhaled deeply. 'Good Luck, Miss Morgan. There is no greater honour than putting yourself in danger for King and country.'

She wondered whether honour had anything to do with her being in an underground bunker facing a man in a floral organza frock, smoking a pipe.

Max took her back up to ground and in a stuffy room next to one of the hangers she met the people with whom she would be training. There were ten of them, at least half were women. There was an Italian woman, Francesca. She seemed vulnerable. It made Janis feel protective. Janis assumed it was her real name, as she hadn't been told by Skinner to tell anyone anything other than the truth.

She wondered whether she would ever see any of these people again. Later, when Max came to check up on her in the mess she asked him and he shook his head. 'So don't get too comfortable.'

He sat across her at a table stuck in a corner. 'Janis, call me Max. You're going to need to develop a fair amount of informality towards me. In Johannesburg, we'll be sharing a flat together, ostensibly living as man and wife. Duncan will go over your cover story in due course.'

She nodded.

'You cannot change your mind now that you've started your training. Unless you fail your final exam, that is.'

Panic grew as she considered him carefully. Could she tell him how afraid she really was? It felt better to keep such fears to herself. 'I understand.'

He was sombre. 'I hope you do.'

Duncan Moore approached and watched Skinner – Max with careful sympathy. Max stood up without a word and followed him out of the mess. Janis watched him walk away. What had she got herself into? She took a deep breath. She didn't know. Still, it felt better than not doing anything. Maybe that's all spying is, she thought to herself, doing something as opposed to nothing at all.

Janis spent a restless night in a hot, airless underground dormitory. She was woken up to loud banging. She rolled off her stretcher bed and got dressed in the uniform that she'd been given the previous night.

They were led out into the desert as the sun rose. Against a pink and burning light they did warm-up exercises. Then they had to run. Janis gasped and panted as her feet sank into the sand. Her lungs burnt and her calves ached. If this as the warm-up she would be sure to fail. She was certain of it. Just when she thought she may collapse Duncan gave them a break.

She was relieved, until she saw the heavy canvas bags filled with sand which they were expected to carry across the sand. Heaving her bag up made her sink deeper into sand. She felt humiliated when Duncan hoisted her bag over her shoulders for her. When she staggered towards the finish line she almost wept with gratitude. After leopard crawling through damp underground corridors , and clambouring over splintered wooden logs, they were finally sent off to shower. Even here she felt monitored. It felt awkward to sing while she stood beneath the lukewarm trickle. It was to signal to any passing men that a woman was in the shower.

After a meagre lunch of stringy meat and hard potatoes they had a lecture. Duncan Moore displayed none of the eccentricity of the day before as he gave them a sober overview on clandestine activity. 'Write your last letters tonight. Say your goodbyes to your family and friends. If you have any loved ones ... Your love for them stops now. You're in this until we finish the war. No more contact with any of the people you know unless absolutely necessary. If you work in a cell, you'll all have pseudonyms. That's all you'll ever call each other. Pray for that, it gets lonely otherwise.'

'Your most prized possession, after this,' Moore held up a thin cylindrical weapon, with a small handle at one end, 'is your memory. It will save your life, or get you killed.'

After a day of excruciating pain and bizarre tips, they finished off with a boxing lesson. She learnt how to punch her opponent, who happened to be the amiable Sergeant Evans.

'Queensberry rules no longer apply here. The only thing to remember about boxing is that it taught you to think quickly and hit hard. As well as how to receive a punch and keep your wits about you. Today, and from this day forward, your aim is to kill your opponent as quickly and as silently as possible.'

Janis panted from exhaustion. She could not imagine even hitting Evans, who seemed to have feet on springs – let alone getting close enough to kill him. She flung her arm out with her fist clenched and he grabbed it easily, twisting it back so that she fell to her knees. At her groan of pain, he immediately released her, apologising profusely. Moore bore down on them, wrenched her up and barked at them both.

'Sergeant Evans, remove the word sorry from your vocabulary. It takes brains to observe the enemy, send code, and assume another identity; not just brawn. This spy sent to assassinate you could just as easily be a woman.'

That night, they sat around a fire, thick blankets draped around their shoulders. Francesca appeared perturbed.

'Camel meat, they feed us camel meat?'

'It's a lot like beef, I thought.' Said Janis.

'And what is this … exploding rat that Mr Moore speaks of?' Francesca looked horrified.

Sergeant Evans grinned.

'Moore told me you skin a rat, and then sew the skin around a fuse. They plan to chuck them in with coal reserves. When you shovel the coal into your furnace, the fuse ignites and then …. Bam.'

He was clearly enamoured with this thought while Francesca curled her lip distastefully. As they began to bicker about the merits of exploding rodents, a thudding sound cut through the fireside murmurs. It grew quickly louder, spitfires taking off in the distance.

'Strange that they're taking off now,' commented Evans.

'Things are not going so good,' said Francesca.

'Throw us a titbit, come on, then,' Evans urged Francesa.

'I am sworn to secrecy,' she said, playfully, clearly considering how much to reveal. She said no more as Moore emerged from the shadows, tightened lines around his mouth.

'When you go to your dorms, try and backtrack in the existing footprints if you can. I suggest you head off soon, you all have a big day tomorrow.'

He slipped back into shadow, and Janis could not hear whether he'd walked off, or whether he was standing just outside their dimming circle of fire-light. The same thought did not occur to either Francesca or Evans. They huddled close together; 'Montgomery's been made Commander of the Eighth Army.'

'That's good news,' enthused Evans.

Francesca's mouth turned down. 'Rommel's close, closer than he's ever been.'

Weariness hit her suddenly and hard. She used it to get away from their gossip. She got up to make her way back to the dormitory, placing one foot carefully in front of the other in the existing footprints in the sand. Behind her, Evans and Francesca whispered softly to one another. Janis looked up at the sky and found the North Star. It glowed robustly among a belt of twinkling fragments, hung against icy blackness. From the depths of her memory she heard the thin echo of her brother's childish voice, 'Worms, monster.'

Janis slipped through the narrow passageway towards the dormitory. She passed a half-open door. Skinner sat close to a dark-haired woman. She gesticulated quickly, muttering in French.

'You don't have to do this …' His voice was a heartfelt plea. 'You've done so much, I miss you…'

Max's concern was a deep stab into Janis, taking her by surprise. She knew she should move but she felt stuck to the floor.

The woman stepped back from his concern. Then Skinner turned and Janis felt his bitter gaze sweep briefly across her before he turned back to the woman.

Janis turned and walked away.

Chapter 7

Johannesburg, August 1943

Johanna sat and brushed her hair in front of her dressing table mirror, a black and white photograph leant against the mirror, and her mother sat and stared sideways towards the camera, a study in inscrutability. A hundred strokes every morning and every evening makes a woman's hair soft and silky. She couldn't remember whether her mother had actually said that; or if it was another of Papa's ways to keep her mother's memory alive.

Brushstroke ten. She cast her mind back to when she was five years old. She remembered Papa's hand gripping hers, it felt as if his eyes burning through the wet. 'Your mother's gone to heaven to be with God.'

Brushstroke twenty. She recalled the gaping hole in the ground. Her father's stern face, the Dominee's rhythmic voice. 'Please God, accept Martha Johanna Caterina back into your fold, keep her safe, and let her bathe in your glory. For she was a woman in whose soul burned the very ideal of nation.'

Brushstroke thirty. Martha Johanna Caterina, a woman who wasted away in a sour smelling bedroom, who had taught others to cook and sew. In between the cross stitch and the loop she explained that many men will count among the greats in the world, but they were born from women, the ultimate defenders of our faith.

Brushstroke forty. Martha Johanna Caterina, a pale still face that could not speak from the depths of a photograph, could not brush her own daughter's hair, or soothe her troubled husband's soul. Johanna knew that was now her job, her place in the world. And she was proud of it, happy to plan Papa's meals, to listen to his concerns about the dual medium education system and the misguided ramblings of Hertzog.

Brushstroke fifty. She remembered walking in the park. The searing cold of winter, her father telling her that it would just be the two of them from now on. But that it would be all right because they would always be enveloped by a larger family, people who

followed the word and the deed of God. People who were sent to Africa to serve God's will. People like them.

Brushstroke sixty. Jews followed a false and greedy god. There are good people and bad people. Some English and maybe even Jews were good, but they were few and far between.

Brushstroke seventy. That wasn't true. She had met one. He'd been at her cousin's house. His hair was red with a face full of freckles. He had a laughing face. Which meant he looked like he was laughing even when he wasn't. Allan Richmond. Could he have also been sent to do God's deed? His father was a minister in the English church. What did it mean if you were a minister in the English church, she'd asked her father, surely you were also sent to do God's word? No, he'd said. It meant you had holiness in you, but it did not mean that you had been chosen.

Brushstroke eighty. She put down her brush and stared at the photograph of her mother. Typing her father's speeches was an honourable job. Allowing the words of great men to enter her and flow from her fingers like a spinning spell. Sometimes when the words made her feel liquid she could almost close her eyes and still find the keys on the typewriter. It was the only thing she could do that Papa didn't know how to. It made her feel close to him. Sometimes, if he had time he would explain what he was dictating. His voice made her feel like a heavy sea.

Brushstroke ninety. There would be another meeting tonight. She had cooked the bredie, and baked the bread. Oom Eric would be coming. They would eat, and then Papa would take him into his study where they would plan his speeches. Sometimes young men would come and after a long meeting in Papa's office they would all stand outside and say a prayer.

Brushstroke one hundred. Johanna wasn't allowed to be part of the circle. But she could watch from her bedroom window, as long as the lights were off. Since the start of the war, the men would quietly gather in the moonlight, their shadowy forms slippery against the pale sandstone outhouse. She didn't need to see the Zuid Afrikaanse Republiek flag unfurl to know it was always her father who shook it free from its wound-up prison. She knew their murmured vow off by heart.

If I retreat, kill me. If I die, avenge me, If I advance, follow me.

Later she went downstairs and said hello to oom Eric who had come for dinner.

'Dear God, grant us your grace in guiding our darkened path, give us hope and light in these troubled times and those ahead. Let us never forget our brothers, held against their will by the Ingelse for nothing other than their spiritual beliefs. Amen."

Johanna opened her eyes to see Oom Eric's deep brown ones staring at her as her father opened his starched white napkin and folded it neatly over his thighs.

'Balthazar, you have a voice for radio, my friend.' Oom Eric intoned, his own voice as rich as chocolate.

Papa smiled. Johanna knew the old joke off by heart.

'No, my friend, I have a pen for radio, you have the voice.'

They smiled and began to eat. Papa ate neatly, small bites, methodically chewing, and swallowing silently, dabbing his mouth often with his napkin, his elbows never touching the table. Johanna loved watching her father eat. In fact, she loved watching him do almost anything. He was so graceful, and quiet. She knew there were many women who were in love with her father, many who wanted to marry him. She had no shortage of women being nice to her in the hope that she could bring them closer to him. But he was immune. 'Your mother was a firebrand, Johanna. I could never replace her.'

Her father never gave himself fully to anything, or anyone, not even her, whom he loved more than anything on this rich earth. A part of him had died with her mother, she felt sure.

When she was small he would walk her to school. When she came home he would look over her sums, and he would eat supper with her every night. Afterwards he would read to her, sometimes from the great Book, but sometimes also from newspapers. He would explain how to think a problem through.

'Stare at it like a snarling dog but do not be afraid. Open yourself to God. He will show you a sign on how to stop the dog from eating you alive. That sign will come in the manner of thought. Perhaps if I give this snarling dog some food he will calm down.

Perhaps if I whip this snarling dog he will run away. These are God's words in your heart.'

'But Papa, what if my thoughts tell me to pet the dog? Is that God's word or my foolish thoughts?'

'If when you think the thought and it is dangerous to yourself, like that one is, then it's the devil who is fighting God for your heart.'

In her dreams, she wanted to return to those days when it was just her and her father. When he would speak to her, read to her and ask her what she thought. Since she'd grown up he'd stopped doing it so much. She remembered once on the farm when she was little, watching her father and his friends riding off on horseback, cantering in kinship, their silence an implicit language among men. She thought when she grew up she too would be among those riders, but that day had never come. Instead, when she went to the farm these days, she still stood on the edge of the stoep watching the men disappear, and all she felt was loss.

But all of that was about to change. The next morning Johanna's father woke her up early and told her to get dressed and come downstairs. She obeyed him. Waiting in the front room was a courtly gentleman who her father introduced as Dr. Eugen Fischer. Johanna felt breathless when her father instructed her to come into his office and take notes while Dr. Fischer gave him the blessings of his learned opinions.

Johanna brought the men tea and biscuits. Her father asked her to give them a few moments, which she did, hovering just outside the door to see if she could catch any smatterings of conversation. She heard nothing that made any sense to her, other than Konzentrationslager. She had never heard the word before and did not know what it meant. Perhaps later, once she'd settled down to type her notes, her father would explain what it meant.

By the time Johanna was summoned into her father's study, Dr. Fischer was poring over a series of photographs that lay side by side on her father's massive oak desk. She caught a glimpse of them before she sat down. They looked like a collection of naked women. Their bodies seemed strangely contorted. Her father shifted them together and slipped them into a pile, face down. Dr. Fischer had not stopped talking. His face was

shining and his voice animated. ‘These women’s offspring which are of interracial unions are of lesser racial quality, no doubt about it.’

Johanna prepared her paper and pencil and sat down to wait for her father’s smile, which would signal her time to begin taking notes. Dr. Fischer realised that she’d entered the room and stared at her with a certain amount of astonishment. He turned to her father and appeared to be very excited. ‘Please, do you mind?’ he gestured towards Johanna. Johanna wondered why her father shook his head and smiled. Dr. Fischer approached and cupped both his hands around the forehead and crown of her head.

‘Look at the shape of Johanna’s head, Balthazar. This is what I mean when I state that the attributes of a people are directly related to their physical characteristics. I am sure that her cognitive abilities match the generous slope of her forehead. A marvelous example of racial purity.’

Johanna felt the force of her father’s love like a wave of intense heat. ‘Indeed.’ He merely smiled at her, but she felt hot with pride. She stroked her forehead and through the softness of her skin she felt the strength of her own enduring bone. It made her want to weep. Her father gave her the meaningful smile and she picked up her pen. Dr. Fischer smiled.

‘Where were we, Balthazar?’

‘You were beginning to outline your experiences on Shark Island?’

‘Ah, yes. In order to frame my hypothesis, I need to state upfront my findings. And those are that, without exception, all European peoples who have absorbed the blood of the inferior races have paid for this absorption with intellectual and cultural decline.’

Johanna wrote and felt the resonance of his words begin to hum inside her.

‘The result of all racial crossing is therefore in brief always the following; a lowering of the level of the higher race, physical and intellectual regression and the beginning of a slow but progressing sickness.’

Papa leaned forward. ‘It is as they say: National Socialism is absolute applied biology.’

‘Exactly.’ Dr. Fischer continued, ‘mental illness, criminality, epilepsy, hysteria, and

alcoholism are genetically determined, which is why racial hygiene is imperative.

Johanna felt a silence descend. Her father observed her with love and concern, and the doctor with a clinical objectivity. Papa turned to Dr. Fischer. 'There comes a time in every young woman's life when she needs to realise the truth of the world she lives in.'

Papa rose from his armchair and stretched his hands out and taking hers, his palms warm and slightly rough. They stood close together. She could feel his comforting presence like a wall running the entire length of her frame.

'Johanna, you are about to become a part of the innermost workings of this fight. It is God's fight, and if you are discovered, you could die. Are you prepared to die at my side?'

Joy gushed through her. Finally, she had been welcomed into the closed circle of her father's love. She looked up at him and smiled.

Dr. Fischer took something out of his trunk. He carefully unwrapped it. A strange, musty smell filled the room. He placed it on a piece of newspaper. It wobbled then toppled over. Johanna bent to pick it up but Dr. Fischer stopped her. He stooped and gently lifted it up and placed on her father's desk. It was brown, and oblong. Nausea rose in Johanna as she realised it was some sort of head. Mainly skull, there was still some brown folds that hung off it.

He hauled out a tape measure and held it between the eye sockets and the top of the skull. 'You will see the difference, for example when I measure this against the distance between your daughter's eyes and where her hairline begins.'

As he jotted down the measurements, a piece of something that glimmered hung on the tape measure like a teardrop. When he placed the strip against her forehead, Johanna wanted to shiver, but didn't. She knew better than to offend the Doctor. As he barked in triumph when he wrote her forehead measurements down next to the skulls, Johanna brushed something hard and cutting off the side of her face. She took her hand away and saw a faint fleck of blood. Dr. Fischer tutted. He immediately grasped her hand and picked the tiny shard of glass off her palm. He smiled at her.

'The women used glass to clean these bones. Some must have remained behind.'

He wiped her forehead gently. He turned back to Balthazar as Johanna stared at the skull once more. It was small. Why was it so small? Her father inadvertently answered her question for her.

'This is a child's skull, yes?'

Dr. Fischer nodded. 'And it proved all my theories. In fact, all the work I did at the camp proved to me that we were doing the right thing. These basters, as well as the Nama, were the offspring of vermin. Once the Luderitz Railway was built we would have no further use for them. They'd already mixed with Europeans, and as you know, had become violent, due to their animalistic nature.'

Johanna sat down. Dr. Fischer slid the photographs he'd pushed to one side out into the open. He flipped one after the other up so that both her and her father could see them. At first Johanna did not recognise the figures as human they were so emaciated. Then she realised the women she'd caught a glimpse of earlier were hanging from their necks.

Her father put a comforting hand on her shoulder. 'These Nama were rounded up and put on this Island.'

Dr. Fischer nodded. 'They were given sufficient food and water, enough to give them the strength to build the railway. Thereafter …' he shrugged, 'when the railway was built, we had no further need for them. Violent and ill to the core.'

An unbidden image came into Johanna's mind. Maria, their serving girl. She was young, stupid, yes, but pretty. She turned to her father, confusion clouding her mind. 'Is Maria violent?' Her father nodded to Dr. Fischer. Who turned back to his pile of photographs and slid two more out onto the desk.

Her father guided her to the side of the desk, and picked up a photograph for her to study closely. Johanna felt nausea bubble up the back of her throat. There was a naked black man staring directly at her. Between his legs lay a huge phallus. On either side of him stood soldiers, dressed in 1907 German uniforms. One held a knife to the phallus, the other laughed. 'These men, are only interested in using that as a weapon of hate.' Papa pointed to the phallus, his disgust was clear. 'Like bulls. It will go into anything.'

Papa did not appear to notice what Johanna did. That the black man's gaze was fearful. Johanna's vomit spilled over her lips and on to her father's carpet. His disappointment was quickly hidden when Dr. Fischer hurriedly escorted her from the study towards the toilet. Johanna hung her head over the toilet bowl, ill with horror, and shame.

After Johanna had emptied the contents of her stomach she wiped her face and went to lie down. Her bedroom was directly above her father's study. She listened to the murmuring of the two men and closed her eyes and fought to get the images of suffering out of her mind. She couldn't.

Later, Papa knocked on her bedroom door. He wanted to see if she was feeling better. Johanna apologised as he gently stroked her forehead. He understood. He sat down next to her bed on the wobbly chair and smiled at the photograph of her mother.

'Would Mama have been sick?'

He shook his head. 'Mama had a strong constitution.'

Until she didn't. Until her illness decimated her. The thought entered her head and she quickly rejected it. The devil. Shame blazed through her, making her hate herself. She wanted to hurt, she wanted to bleed. She wanted to feel what those women felt. She deserved to. Except they really did, because of who they were and she didn't, because of who she was.

'I'll do better next time.' Johanna fought back her tears.

Papa smiled. 'Of course you will. Sympathy is a necessary trait in a woman. Just don't allow it to get in the way of good sense.'

'Of course not, Papa.'

'Now, when you're ready, come back downstairs and help me type Oom Eric's next transmission.'

He had forgiven her.

Chapter 8

SOE Training Modules 7 – 10, T.M.E September 1942

The first three weeks had been a haze of running, and boxing, leaving Janis feeling no fitter or able to hurt anyone. She had quickly learnt how to pick locks, and the basics of burglary. Observation techniques had been fascinating, how to reconnoitre a building for subversive purposes. Shooting included the day and night target practice predominantly using the Welrod, a slim gun with no markings, other than a serial number. The weapon was light and easy to manage. It had a detachable single stack magazine containing a maximum of eight rounds which also served as the pistol's grip.

Their shooting master taught them how to shoot with one hand, around corners and how to take solid aim at night. Her father had taught her to use a rifle when she was a teenager, and she'd shot a buck with James once. They practised loading and unloading the Welrod in utter darkness, and even slept with it under their beds for a night. After this she began to feel an attachment to her weapon, which is what the intention was, she supposed.

The shooting master initiated them into the two-shot rule: 'You must kill your man. One shot may kill him but it is better to be absolutely certain by putting two shots into him . . . because his nervous system breaks up immediately.'

With her success at shooting earmarking her as one of the top four students, she began to enjoy a certain level of respect within the group. Poor Francesca struggled with target practice, driving the master to lambaste her in front of them all, citing her as the student most likely to die in the field.

'He hate me,' Francesca would sob, while Janis tried to comfort her.

Janis had realised after a week that even though she cried often, Francesca's beautifully made up face would never show any real signs of her frequent crying bouts. This did not seem to occur to Evans, who kept close to Francesca whenever possible. He did everything he could to offer comfort. Francesca accepted it gratefully.

And through all of this, she had had only one sighting of Max, standing too close to a dark haired woman. Rumour had it she was French. For the past three weeks Max hadn't been very present, and she felt a sense of expansion in his absence. She didn't constantly find herself glancing over her shoulder to see whether he approved of what she said or did.

Week 4, Module 8 – the Art of Disguise

Janis studied herself critically in the mirror. Her long, red hair had been scraped under a black wig, making her skin even paler than normal. She wore a long black dress, with a high white collar. Her stockings were thick and sweat dribbled down her back. Francesca, in an equally dour dress, still felt the need to outline her lips with a bright red lipstick.

Duncan Moore examined her, 'Useless, obvious and counter-productive.' He announced, turning Janis around to face the others. 'Why, would you want to dress like a spinster when you're clearly, nothing of the sort?'

'You said find something that changes my appearance ….'

'You look like you're doing dress-up, Miss Morgan. Alter your appearance, but always within the parameter of who you are. Make yourself conspicuous, or inconspicuous. Rich or poor. You have red hair; you can die it brown, or blonde.'

He lifted up her hands and studied her fingernails. 'If you're poor, these nails are too clean. If you're rich, your hands are not soft enough.'

'But you ….'

He raised an eyebrow

'I first met you wearing a dress.'

The class chortled until Duncan's hoarse voice rode over them.

'Foolish indeed when I was recognised by the Spanish, and managed to find refuge at the British Embassy in the nick of time. Like you, they saw through the disguise almost immediately.'

His smile was bitter, 'One day, I intend to prove to HQ it can be done, until then, I'm still in training.'

She could feel Evans avoiding her look.

'People are naturally unobservant; if you create a detailed *sense* of a persona they will not question it. Preconceptions and snobbery are useful tools for a spy. Use them to your advantage. But never assume that the people you're trying to fool are fools themselves. If you make vague choices, my woman's a nurse, that's simply not good enough. What *kind* of nurse are you, an efficient one? If so, what are the details of efficiency? A starched uniform, shiny shoes, a polished watch perhaps? When witnesses are questioned on our efficient nurse, we want them to say, she seemed very conscientious, we had no idea she was anything other than extremely good at her job. Of course by this time the nurse is thirty miles outside of town, sending in her coded message, with incorrectly spelt words, as previously agreed to.'

And so it went on. They relentlessly got dressed, and undressed, died their hair and created cover stories for themselves, with past histories, and fake relationships until Duncan Moore would crack his rare smile as a final victory.

'Well done, Miss Morgan, a pert doctor's assistant, I must say.'

Once they had the practice they then worked on their real cover stories. This was done separately, as they were not allowed to reveal them to each other. Max had re-appeared to consult with Janis on hers. He seemed remote and for that she was grateful. After a few meetings he never came back and Janis completed the story with Duncan.

Every morning after oats and camel milk, they would run for what seemed like hours. Running on sand was extremely difficult, running for a long time on sand felt almost impossible. Every morning Evans would assure Janis that her body would get used to the strain, but it never felt like it was getting close to anything of the sort. Her lungs would burn, and she always felt like vomiting afterwards. After an hour of running came the boxing. She was getting much better at feinting and parrying, frustratingly, she still lacked the physical stamina to maintain all the fancy moves she'd learnt.

Week 5, Module 9 - Dirty Sword Play.

Duncan presented them each with a small knife. 'A silent and deadly weapon, easily concealed and in the hands of an expert, there is no defence, except a firearm, or running like hell.'

She turned it around in her hands, and it felt more alien to her than the Welrod. Duncan asked Evans to volunteer and proceeded to give a biology lesson on the internal organs of his body.

'The stomach is here, kidneys here, liver there. You want to slip the blade in, anywhere here ….' He gestured across the full expanse of Evans's abdominal area. 'Chances are your opponent has already seen the knife. So you need to create a gap, a moment when his stomach is unprotected.' Duncan began moving from foot to foot and waving the knife in front of Evans' face. Evans lifted up his hands to protect himself and Duncan swiftly pointed the knife up against his stomach. 'Drive it in here and then twist it upwards, if you're very lucky you could swipe the underside of a lung. Of course you could toss sand in your opponents' eyes, a scarf, anything. The point is to kill him. It's no good if you've just slashed his arm, you need to finish off the job.'

Janis felt slightly queasy. She'd seen a horse shot, a snake's head hacked off, buck being skinned. But they were animals. She chanced a sideways glance at Francesca, who seemed to be struggling with the thought of whether she could kill a man too.

'Find a partner.' Barked Duncan and Janis gravitated swiftly towards Francesca. 'No, Miss Morgan, find a man. It's more likely you'll be up against a bloke.' He steered her once more towards amiable Evans. He took their real knives away and gave them wooden ones to practice with.

She faced Evans, as he faced her, legs fairly wide apart, hands loosely at his sides, the prop knife in his right hand. She felt hot and her hands started to sweat. Evans moved first, and more quickly than she was anticipating, right towards her abdomen. She

quickly shifted balance pulling away, narrowly missing the knife. She came back at him fast, using her left hand to wave in his face, she gripped the knife and aimed for his stomach, but he grabbed her wrist before her knife could get anywhere near it, twisted it hard and the knife clattered out of her hand. Evans then put his knife tip to her stomach.

'You're dead,' intoned Duncan, 'in less than a minute.'

Evans stood back, apologising under his breath as Duncan moved over. He picked up Janis's knife and gave it to her. 'This is your life you're fighting for, Miss Morgan, not an embroidery competition. Try again.'

Humiliated, Janis gripped the knife and faced Evans once more. This time she came at him hard, slamming her shoulder into him, so that he staggered backwards. His arms flailed, and then she moved the knife towards his stomach. He regained his balance more quickly than she anticipated and moved forward against her, knocking her over. He fell on top of her, pinning her down and grabbing her knife wrist while she struggled uselessly under him like a flea. He shook the knife from her grasp, Duncan was shouting something in the background, but she couldn't work out what it was. Adrenalin pulsated through her making her struggle harder and harder until Evans lifted his elbow back and she realised he was going to hit her with it. She stilled and closed her eyes, bracing herself for the pain. It never came. Evans scuttled off her and she rolled over on to her stomach, groaning.

'You have a long way to go, Miss Morgan, but at least this time some killer instinct kicked in. Well done, Evans.'

'But I'm a woman.' She blurted, 'he's stronger than me.'

Duncan smiled. 'We all have obstacles to overcome, Miss Morgan, that is yours.'

Janis's utter physical weakness in the face of the gentle Evans's strength was alarming. It made her feel small and afraid. Since the desert she'd become used to fear, but this

was different. A driving panic broke inside her. If she had to kill someone, it would require ingenuity and strength, ingenuity she could muster, but how could she ever make herself stronger than a man?

That night, at the fire after supper Evans came to apologise.

'Please don't' she insisted. 'It's all part of the training.'

He grimaced. 'I'll never get used to hurting a woman.'

'Why?'

'Frailer sex and all that.'

'If we're being trained to kill, then you could hardly call us frail.'

Evans was confused. 'Janis you couldn't get me off you. You aren't strong enough. Cheer up, women are stronger than men in other ways, they give birth after all.'

Janis didn't want to cheer up. Giving birth had nothing to do with not being able to protect your own life because you weren't strong enough. The sense of utter helplessness when she was trapped beneath Evans came back, and the memory simultaneously angered and depressed her.

The next morning, Janis woke Evans up early, and begged him to come for a run. She tied a loose rope around both their wrists so that she could match his pace, or if not, use his rhythm to support hers. He obliged and ran the warm up lap with one eye closed. The first lap she managed. The second and third laps brought on the familiar burning in her lungs. By the fourth lap she wanted to collapse, Evans ran faster than her, the rope pulling her gently. Evans wanted to slow down but she shook her head, unable to speak.

'Breathe.' Evans shouted at her.

'I… am.'

'No, you're holding your breath, you're going to faint.'

She expelled her breath and immediately took another.

'Let it out,' Evans was laughing at her.

She exhaled belligerently and inhaled quickly. The focus on her breath made her lose sight of how far she still had to run, it suddenly felt slightly easier. They ran another two laps until she could not run anymore. She slowed down, Evans next to her, breathing hard, but not exhausted. He smiled cheerily at her.

'Running's not everything, Janis.'

She doubled over and vomited while he looked discreetly in the other direction.

Week 6. Module 10 – Interrogation & Consolidation

It was their final week, and she did not feel nearly ready to leave. Initially it had all felt like a game, and her friendships with Evans and Francesca had grown out of those circumstances. She knew she would probably never see them again. Duncan had gone over each of their cover stories endlessly, poking holes in them, forcing Janis (and the others she assumed) to find a way to knit up the holes.

'These stories need to become part of your bone marrow. When you've endured twenty four hours of intense interrogation and possibly some torture, and you still stick to the same version, then you have won and they have lost.'

The night before the final test, they sat outside, shivering in the desert cold, looking for the stars. Francesca was nervous. 'You think they will torture us?'

'Nah. They'll give us a hard time though,' said Evans.

She wondered how he knew, but didn't ask. Skinner appeared from the shadows, and called her aside. He looked haggard, the last time she'd seen him look this bad was when they'd been in the desert.

'Good luck, Morgan.'

'Will you be part of it, whatever 'it' is?'

'No. because I'm your official handler, I'm not allowed to be there. Even if I could be present I'd be no support to you of course, you're on your own in this. Good luck.'

He moved off.

'Max, are you alright?'

He smiled, it didn't reach his eyes.

'Tired, working hard like you.'

She watched him move back towards the stairs leading down into the bunker. She wasn't sure but there seemed to be the outline of someone waiting for him. Their outlines merged briefly before disappearing below.

Janis wasn't sure whether it was the harsh light or the shouting that woke her up. For as long as she could remember in the brief moment between sleep and consciousness she'd always experienced a separation of image and sound. Behind the light was a sense of menace, it took slightly longer for the shouting to penetrate.

She was dragged out of bed in her pyjamas. She was surrounded by German soldiers. Was this the final test? As she was roughly led to a small cell, she began to fear that perhaps this was a real raid. Janis was thrown in and then heard the door being locked. Her body hurt from being tossed to the floor There was no bed, just a bucket in the

corner which stank of someone else's urine. She couldn't stop the fear from radiating through her. In the distance she heard Francesca crying, and for the first time it sounded genuine. She put her head on her knees.

She did not know how much time had passed before they came for her. Two soldiers, dressed in German uniform, with swastikas around their arms. They hauled her up and dragged her down a dank corridor into a small room which stank of sweat. There were two men in the corner, Captains, they too had swastikas around their upper arms. She hadn't seen any of them before. Her fear that this could be real increased. She was plonked down on to a rickety chair. One of the Captains sat down and smiled at her.

'Janis Morgan, yes?'

She and Skinner, on one of the few occasions they'd spoken had decided that she would use her own name.

'Yes.'

'What are you doing in Johannesburg, please?'

This was the test. Even though his German accent was very good. She felt intensely relieved. She almost smiled. But then he bellowed abruptly, too close to her ear, 'You think this is a joke?'

She shook her head; her ear felt like it was swelling up from the onslaught of the sound.

'What are you doing in Johannesburg, Please?'

She slipped into her practiced responses. 'I'm a photographer.'

'And you take photos of Germans?'

'Anyone who pays me.'

‘You make friends with Germans?’

‘There are Germans living in Johannesburg who are not in the War.’

He held up her Welrod.

‘What is this?’

She was thrown, she didn’t know if she’d even be issued with a weapon. This felt below the belt.

‘I don’t know.’

‘You don’t know?’

‘I’ve never seen it before.’

The Captain gripped her chin and forced her face back to his. ‘You know how to use this?’

‘No, it’s my … Husband’s.’

‘You have a husband?’

‘Yes, wounded in North Africa, he’s been medically discharged.’ Too much information.

‘And why would he have this if he was a soldier?’

‘I have no idea.’

He tossed the Welrod on to the table. It had its magazine on. ‘Pick it up.’

She tried to pick it up as clumsily as possible. She saw it was loaded.

'You liar.'

The words tore through her.

'No.'

'This is your weapon.'

'No, I promise you….'

'All right. Tell me why your husband has this?'

'I have no idea. He goes for meetings sometimes.'

'Meetings with whom?'

'I don't know, he doesn't tell me.'

'You are lying.'

'No, I promise. Please ….'

She couldn't stop revealing her fear any longer.

'Take off your clothes.'

'What? No.'

The Captain nodded to a soldier who grabbed her and roughly tore off her pyjama top. She covered herself with her arms. 'Take off your pants'

'Please ….'

'Take them off, or we will do it for you.'

If it had ever felt like a game it stopped at that second. Janis slid her pyjama pants down, and kept her body hunched over her thighs. A soldier yanked her up. The other one gripped her arm. She stood stark naked, in front of six men. She struggled against the rough grip of the soldiers. 'This is too much, you never said it would go this far ….'

She tried to make eye contact with the soldiers holding her but they avoided her eyes.

'Please ….'

The Captain adjusted the overhead lamp so that it shone directly into her eyes. She began to shake. 'She is red all over.'

The men laughed. She felt a weakness spread out from her stomach. She looked at the floor. The Captain once again grabbed her chin, standing so close to her he must have felt her nipples through his shirt.

'You tell us what we want to know and then we'll give you something to wear.'

He forced her chin up so that she would look at him. His eyes were in shadow, impossible to read.

'Let's start again. What are you doing in Johannesburg.'

Her skin crawled from fear and the cold. 'I'm a photographer.'

'What are you really doing in Johannesburg?'

'Taking photographs. I have a studio.'

'Where?'

'Just off Commissioner Street, half way down.'

'Have you ever photographed Balthazar Maritz.'

'Yes.'

'You know he is a member of the Ossewa Brandwag?'

'I didn't.'

He stepped back suddenly. The soldiers pushed her to the floor. The gritty cement bit into her knees.

'Whose gun is this?'

'My husband's'

'What's his name?'

Choose a name and details you will remember under duress, Duncan had urged.

'James Morgan.'

'Which division?'

'South African Second Division.

'Was he at the fall of Tubruk?

'No, he was wounded just before.'

'Get up.'

The cold had deadened her limbs. But she drew up her legs and hunched over them, wrapping her arms around her knees. She lifted her head and began to scream. It felt better than keeping quiet. The soldiers grabbed her and yanked her up to standing, as she continued to scream, loosening the terror and giving it freedom. They began to shake her, but it merely added a vibratory quality to the high pitched sound. The Captain clamped his hand across her mouth. He looked at one of the soldiers.

'Take her back.'

They led her quickly to her cell, chucked her in and locked the door. She needed to urinate, she gingerly held herself over the stinking bucket until she was finished. She held herself as tightly as possible in an attempt to create some warmth. In the aftermath of the adrenalin, she felt weak. She went over the interrogation, it had been frightening and the stripping was something she'd never anticipated, but it did make sense. She could see this through, now all she had to do was get through the waiting.

'They'll leave you alone in the dark for hours, to panic, to imagine the torture. And just when you can go to sleep, or relax in anyway, they come back for you.' Duncan had warned them.

She thought of her time in the desert, the knowledge that she may die beneath a truck. The photographs she'd taken of the last battle she'd been stuck in; the clarity with which she'd taken them surrounded by the noise and the screaming. She re-imagined that feeling and breathed into it.

Janis waited and waited. And then she waited some more. She lost all sense of time. The darkness was oppressive. She felt hot and cold. She began to cry. Her tears leaked through her thin mental defences. her imagination took hold and she imagined being held down and her fingernails torn out. She could feel the pain of it. She screamed. She screamed until her voice went hoarse. When she began to cry she realised there were no

tears, just dry heaving. Eventually her imagination gave up, and the sensation of pain began to dissipate.

Her mind lurched from one blood drenched thought to the next. Like an out of control train it rattled and heaved down the line as if it would career off into unkempt jungle at any moment. In the darkness after she'd imagined being raped. She needed to find a way out of the maelstrom of her absolute terror.

She began to focus on her breathing. In and out. She placed her hand on her stomach and felt the rise and fall of it. Her goosebump lined skin felt separate from her. Like a small and brave being. She rubbed her stomach and the action began to soothe her.

Janis could not work out how long she'd spent in her cell when they came for her again and took her back to the interrogation room.

'Please, just a blanket.'

The soldiers shook their heads.

The same Captains were waiting for her.

'What is your relationship with Balthazar Maritz?'

'I took his portrait.'

'You spend a lot of time with a man you only took one photograph of.'

'I took his daughter's portrait too.'

'Are you having an affair with Balthazar Maritz?'

'No.'

'Does your husband know him?'

'No.'

'Why does your husband sometimes live with you, sometimes not?'

'He still works for the army.'

'You work for the army too.'

'No.'

'You spy for the British.'

'No.'

'You spying on Balthazar Maritz for the British.'

'No.'

'Give me a cigarette.'

Janis could not believe her ears. She began to struggle, but they were too strong. Someone lit a cigarette which the Captain inhaled and then brought the glowing tip an inch away from her right nipple. Frantically she looked at the men watching. She made eye contact with the only one who looked directly at her.

'Help me, you bastard, help me.'

His shuttered glance skidded away. Her head dropped, saliva dripped from her open mouth.

Unbidden, a memory of her brother came into her mind. James had fashioned his arrow and placed it against his makeshift bow. Lean against the tree Monster, and whatever you do, don't move. He placed the apple on her head. It wobbled around, and she had to hold it still. She stared up the sky it burned her eyes and made them water. He sloped back a fair pace away from her and placed the arrow against the bow, and pulled it back. Birds twittered in the hot, dry silence and James squinted, crinkling his face. He loosed the arrow and at the last minute she lost her nerve. She moved side-ways and the arrow caught the edge of her upper arm. Pain spread through her as she burst into rousing tears dropping to the rough grass. He fell over her, sweating and full of panic. Don't die monster, I'll give you my bike.

She could feel the cigarette coal, a pinprick of heat in the dry cold. It almost brushed her skin. 'Have you ever seen a woman without nipples? It's a sad sight. Would your husband want that?'

His breath stank of smoke. The pounding fear had made her forget for a moment she was meant to have a husband. Mentally she grasped the fact close. She shook her head.

'That's not all we will burn. Those pretty little buttons will only be the start.

'Fuck off.'

He was as taken aback by the obscenity as she was. He smacked her hard on her left cheek. He held the cigarette close to her eye.

'This is what happens next. If you are not telling me the truth.'

He stepped back and slid the cigarette into his mouth. He nodded at the soldiers and the led her out of the room back to her cell. She collapsed on to the floor. Shock made her tremble and the cold made her teeth clatter.

She did not know how long she lay curled up on the floor, until she heard footsteps gather momentum and stop outside her door. They were coming for her again. She was

stunned at the thought that they might actually torture her. She did not know how she would manage if they did.

The door opened and she felt the draft against her cold skin. A single set of footsteps announced a person approaching. She felt a blanket fall on her, and she grabbed at it, pulling it around her. The soldier squatted near to her.

'Well done Janis.'

She sat up, Max was as sober as she'd ever seen him.

'Stay away from me.'

'If you're ever captured, you will be on your own. If you can withstand this, there's a damn good chance you'll withstand a real interrogation.'

She shook her head. 'I can't.'

'You already have.'

He pulled her up. 'Let's get you into the shower.'

He led her through the large communal shower area, turned a shower on until the steam rose off the floor. Only then did he leave.

Janis slipped under the stinging water and attempted to sing, but only tears came.

Chapter 9

Johannesburg, September 1942

Johanna's fingers tapped on the typewriter keys lightly and swiftly as her father spoke.

'Because we have been chosen, we are victimised. Because we are God's people our forefathers were herded into camps and starved to death. We have an invisible stamp on our souls. It is the mark of the chosen. We are God's word and God's deed. The light of holiness shines through us. And for this, our land is burnt, our women punished and our Gold is stolen.'

Balthazar paced as he talked. His voice a deep and rhythmic bass that rose and fell with the power of his words.

'But change is on its way. The Engelse have no legs left to stand on. For in Germany there is a man of such integrity, of such vision, who offers us a new way forward. He has swept across Europe and is driving English dogs back from the North. Tobruk is a victory of Germany and it is our victory too. We embrace it. We support it. We celebrate it. Like the Germans, we will do whatever it takes to remove the blight of the greedy and the savage off our land. Change is coming. We must take up arms, we must await instruction from our Lord and we must be ready. Because when we hear the word of God, we must act. There can be no doubt, or fear. We must embrace the power invested in us and allow it to run through our veins like liquid gold. That is its value and that is its power.'

Johanna felt inspired. Her father's passion was infectious. He stopped pacing and smiled at her. 'Do you think Oom Eric will like that?'

'Of course.'

Johanna felt the full force of her father's love as he smiled. 'Well, he'll want changes made, he always does. But it's a start.'

'You should be on the radio, Papa, Oom Eric is right.'

'No, he is the public voice. Some wars are better fought when led from the shadows.'

Chapter 10

South Sudan, October 1942

Janis and Max arrived in Port Sudan at dawn. After checking into their hotel, Max told her to go and sleep for a few hours before their next briefing. She obeyed him without hesitation.

Waking a few hours later to an intense, sticky heat, Janis went straight to her window. The thick air thrummed over the ocean, producing tiny, reluctant swells. There were a few electro-hydraulic cranes lazily lifting trunks, boxes and other goods from graceful steamers on to the jetty; sailors and port officials gesticulating and shouting instructions. Janis could only hear the rattle of her vigorous fan above her mosquito-net-draped bed.

She moved towards the other window, a porthole shaped piece of glass, and placed her hands against the vast and empty expanse of the desert. 'Kitchener's dream,' Skinner had told her the English called Port Sudan, as it was one of the most modern ports on the East coast of Africa. She slipped into the small bathroom shower and opened the cold tap to allow tepid water to rinse the grime and stickiness away.

Skinner was waiting for her at the hotel entrance, strangely relaxed in his white linens.

'You ever been snorkeling, Morgan?'

'Once, at Kalifi.'

He looked slightly disappointed. 'Let's go, the boatman's waiting.'

They ambled back towards the far end of harbour, and met a few local boatmen who guided them into strange box like boats. Avoiding Skinner's outstretched hand, she skidded off the edge of the jetty and landed on her feet, luckily, but fairly hard on the glass bottomed floor of the boat. The low sides of the boat were made of glass too. The boatman nimbly leapt in, and smiled widely.

'Welcome to the Marine Garden of Africa.'

He chugged out into the open sea. The breeze was a welcome relief and she enjoyed the boat cresting and dipping over the gentle swells. Skinner sat silent next to her, and then

suddenly exclaimed at a sight through the glass bottom. It was a coral reef, its gold, green and orange prehistoric contortions iridescent in the light. Every so often the reef would become overwhelmed by swirling schools of fish; a startling array of blue, garish salmon pink, and luminous green. In spite of herself she was mesmerized, sinking on to the glass bottom, to absorb the fantastic spectacle below. Max scrabbled in a cooler box and produced a bottle of champagne, which he proceeded to pop open noisily.

She was taken aback, both by the gesture and by his sudden eager enjoyment. He slopped liquid into a champagne glass and proceeded to toast her. 'You deserve this, and a whole lot bloody more, Janis.'

They clinked glasses, and he slid down next to her. 'Extraordinary, never seen anything like it.' He said, admiring the world below.

'It's quite a sight. I've snorkeled the reefs at Kilifi, but this is unusually captivating,' she agreed.

'You had an idyllic life, growing up on a farm, snorkeling in the Indian Ocean, it seems.'

'It was idyllic. It was also tougher than people think, but I learnt more than I would've growing up in England.'

They drank their champagne in silence as the boat bobbed above a silent and magical world. She hauled out the camera and began experimenting with how to capture the world below without getting any of the glass reflection. He shifted slightly closer to her.

'Let's have a photograph then.'

Janis focussed the lens on him, his black flapping hair a stark contrast against the brilliant sky and sea.

'All set?'

When she nodded again, Skinner took the camera out of her hand and handed it to the boatman, 'You don't mind do you?'

The boatman took the camera carefully, it made her anxious to watch but Skinner drew her into the circle of his arm, and held her against him. 'He'll be all right, won't you, Sir?'

The boatman peered through the lens, 'Don't move anything, just press the button,' she called.

'Smile for the camera, sweetheart, it's our honeymoon.'

Max cupped the back of her neck as he smiled down at her. Her camera recording lies as well as truths. The boatman gingerly handed it back, and she skidded out of Skinner's physical orbit. She packed her camera away as he sipped champagne.

'With any luck, it'll be useful as part of our cover.'

'That's if it's even in focus.'

'Nothing wrong with a bit of soft focus.'

He leaned his head back against the side of the boat and closed his eyes.

'What's next?' she asked.

'It's downhill from here on, I'm afraid,' said Max. 'Johannesburg's a grim place, not a lot of variety, hideous cheese. Of course there's rationing, nothing like the luxury of Cairo. The place is grubby and dangerous.'

'I've been there a number of times to visit my grandparents, I don't remember it being too bad?'

'There's always some kind of violence somewhere. Gangs on the outskirts of the mines, robberies, that kind of thing. You should be pretty safe in the city centre though.'

She nodded. 'Balthazar Maritz?'

'He's the man we need to know as much as possible about.'

'What do you suspect him of? Nazi collusion?'

'Among other things.'

Skinner glanced at the boatman, who seemed focused on steering the boat back into the harbour. 'We'll get to all that in good time. I wanted to say, that it's been sometimes been tough for you, and I know I haven't made things any easier.'

Janis didn't know what surprised her more, the sincere apology or the fact that a flying fish shot out of the water behind him, skimmed the surface like a silver bullet before submerging itself back into the sea. 'Did you see that?'

'No. What?'

'A flying fish.'

He looked around warily. 'Are you sure?'

'Yes, look.'

It shot out of the water once more, its wings buzzing, before it disappeared once again below. The boatman shook his head, 'They make a lot of mess,' he told them, and shrugged. 'But they taste good.'

'Poor chaps,' murmured Max, 'They're the aberrations of the ocean, aren't they?'

'If you're looking for aberrations, you'll find a lot worse than flying fish, Max.'

'Circumstances made them develop like that. That's all I mean.' He poured the last of the champagne into her glass, 'Come on, there's no more of this where you're going.'

They finished their drinks in silence, as the boatman steered them back into the harbour, which was trembling from the dense heat and sparkling water.

Much later, they walked back to the hotel past the small white mosque with its green doors and graceful minaret, the Imam at the top of it, calling for evening prayers. Skinner gave a subtle shiver. 'That screeching is depressing,' he admitted. 'If I'm ever going to commit to a religion, at least be bloody joyful about it.'

She smiled. Skinner joyful was not something she could readily call to mind.

He bought her dinner. He was charming, entertaining her with anecdotes about his childhood holidays on an island off the west of Scotland. He painted a picture of a carefree life. He spoke affectionately of his parents. She let the stories flow over her, avoiding comparing them to her own. She didn't want to talk about her father, who had run his farm with a resentment that leaked into every corner of her being. Whose love

for her made her feel ashamed for reasons she could never articulate or understand. Whose sustained anger towards her brother made her feel guilty and raw.

As she listened to Skinner describing going hunting with his father she realised she'd lived one childhood for her father which was dutiful and sober, and another childhood with her brother which was reckless and joyful. James could never hide his naked love for life like she could. It's what he had been punished for. He loved the army, and being a soldier. It was what had made him happy as an adult. Now he was being punished for that too.

Was she doing this to appease her guilt? Janis didn't know. She didn't want to think too deeply about her reasons. All she knew was that beneath her reserve she had a creeping sense of excitement. Surviving the interrogation had made her feel strong in ways she'd never imagined she could be. Listening to Max regale anecdotes soothed her. She knew what was coming was going to be challenging and dangerous. She also knew she'd had good training, and in spite of everything, Max was good at what he did. If he trusted her she could trust herself.

Janis realised that he had stopped speaking and was considering her in his peculiarly objective way. 'You're not very forthcoming about your life, Janis.'

She shrugged. 'I don't have to be, do I?'

'I suppose not. You have any other siblings?'

'Only James.'

'You were close as children? I found my sisters absolutely dreary from the word go.'

'James and I were always close, yes.'

'It's hard to live with the not knowing. It never gets easier, but you find a way.' His tone was sympathetic. She realised that in all her dealings with him he had only ever sought out the truth of things. Maybe it was because he was a spy.

After dinner Max said goodbye to her. 'You'll leave first thing tomorrow. I'll be in South Africa in a month or so. When you arrive, the war office sergeant who'll collect you will sort everything out. He'll give you a couple of choices as to where you'll stay; you need

to make them based on your portraiture needs. He'll give you your allowance, Good Luck.'

Max left. She went up to her room, as the shadows thrust long fingers into the desert sand. For the first time since she'd encountered Max Janis finally allowed herself to acknowledge that her intense dislike of him had disappeared, leaving uncertain warmth in its place.

Part 3

The Seeds of the Church

Chapter 11

Johannesburg, October 1942

A sensible operator is encouraged to constantly run through his or her mind the answers to routine questions they are likely to be confronted with at a checkpoint, or police spot check such as 'Who are you', 'Where are you?' – this can be a bit awkward for an agent fresh from a parachute drop – 'Where are you going and why?' Security is a frame of mind attainable through self-discipline and self-training that will make the taking of precautions a 'habit.'

SOE Handbook

Three days later, Janis walked up Kerk Street Johannesburg. The sun was hot on her neck and she had to squint her eyes against the sun. The street was wide and the cars that ambled along it stately. She felt a sudden rush of longing. Her grandfather was no longer alive but everything about the city reminded her of him. she wondered what he would make of her new and covert life. She imagined him still being alive and how it would feel if she met him for tea and had to lie about her life. Would she be able to pretend that Max was her husband?

Would she feasibly be able to lie about anything? The question hit her with a sickening thud. She'd never been very good at lying. She would have to learn. Suddenly the sun did not feel as warm and welcoming.

She finally found herself in front of Normandy Court. Through her lens she captured a nine floor block of flats, with its smooth development of balconies and porthole styled windows, it reminded her of the vast steamers that trundled across the Atlantic, which

she supposed was why they'd referred to the architecture of the building as a steamship style. A small black child rushed past her, his mother shouting after him. Her voice was strident. When she realised Janis was standing in front of her she became demure. As soon as Janis turned her back the noisy voice returned. Janis tilted the camera slightly to further create the illusion of looking up at the building. She felt a rush of affection for the city of her childhood return.

She'd rented the last available ground floor flat, near the back, with its own peculiar oddity, the servant's door opened out on to the street. One could either enter through the small but beautifully crafted marble and wood entrance hall, or through the small servant's door off the kitchen. Which was precisely why Janis had chosen it.

She picked up her suitcase, slung her camera back around her neck and walked into the building.

The next morning, Janis placed her portraiture advertisement in the newspapers, *Dagbreek* and *Hoofstad*. She knew that Max had a contact who would introduce her services to Balthazar Maritz via his daughter. But her first job was to place the advertisement, which she did. She then found ways to keep herself busy while she waited for the prey to bite.

***

Johanna admitted Piet Nel and escorted him into the front room. He sat waiting patiently while she brewed him tea. When she served it to him she could feel him watching her. They sat in silence. He was good looking she thought. Short blonde hair, big brown eyes, and muscular arms. She liked watching them as he moved and gesticulated. They were brown and almost hairless, with small well shaped hands.

Sometimes at night she would find herself imagining those hands stroking her face. It made her feel hot as if she was suffering from some acute illness. Then she would force herself to stop. She wanted him to hold her, she often thought about it. Then she would remember the huge phalluses of the slaves Dr. Fischer and her father had shown her and she would feel sick and excited at the same time. She needed to pray more, she told herself.

Piet often spoke to her quietly, and at length about his philosophy. She found it boring and wouldn't often concentrate for long. This time he seemed to realise. She felt embarrassed, 'Piet, I'm sorry. I have so much on my mind …'

He smiled at her indulgently. It irritated her. 'As I was saying, I saw this advertisement for a special on portraits …' He handed her the newspaper clipping. 'Since you have no photographs of you and your father …'

She clasped the paper and read the advertisement. Janis Morgan, portrait photographer. She was a woman. Johanna was curious. She smiled at Piet. 'Thank you so much for thinking of me. You are so kind.' He smiled back.

Later, when they'd finished their tea and she escorted him to her father's study, she allowed him to leave his hand on the small of her back for longer than he should have. It made her excited and she wanted to turn her body and press it fully against his. But she knew he would be shocked by that. She stepped back, and looked down at the ground before walking away and leaving him outside her father's study door.

***

A few weeks later, Max Skinner walked swiftly down Commissioner Street, face and head muffled in a coarse scarf, to protect him from the grating dust brought courtesy of

sudden storm generated winds, from the surrounding mine dumps. As he turned the corner into Loveday Street, an aggressive updraft of wind propelled him, driving him faster towards his meeting with Poulsen. He was dreading it.

He came to a two story, ramshackle building in need of paint. *Statton & Statton Quantity Surveyors* it said, in a lack-lustre faded paint way. He climbed the narrow stairs and knocked on the door marked 21. One of Poulsen's women let him in and escorted him into his dingy office, thick with the smell of cherry pipe tobacco.

'Tea?"

He shook his head, craving a whisky, but knew better than to ask the old hag. God knows where Poulsen found them, ' Old boy, nothing more loyal than a woman who's just given birth, or a woman who's never going to.'

Max stared at the rickety drinks cabinet, the mahogany veneer peeling fast, willing it to open and pour a stiff one of its own accord. He slumped into an armchair, wondering if the endless insomnia had finally ruined what was left of his infantile mind. Poulsen crept in noiselessly, it was a peculiar trick of his, something he prided himself in doing. 'Forget about alerting Jerry, it's your bloody compadres you need protection from.' Poulsen was born suspicious; he'd struggled to trust his own mother's womb.

'Dear boy.'

When Poulsen gripped his hand, in his very dry clasp, and patted his wrist with the most amount of love any man can show another, that's when he knew.

'Whisky?'

'Please.'

He watched the old man splash a quadruple tot into a smeared glass tumbler, he heard the wind come up again, howling through the narrow brick and mortar divide like a drunken whore's lament. He watched himself take the drink and heard himself thank Poulsen.

Poulsen sank into the chair opposite him, carefully stroking his sandy hair across the wide expanse of his bald pate. Max watched as he took big gulps, whilst eyeing him through drooping pale lids. His nails were longish, and needed clipping. Max felt his breath struggle up from the bottom of his sternum, and then emerge through his dry lips like a rattling train. Poulsen seemed not to notice. As the silence stretched between them, Poulsen shook his drink, the whisky slapping palely against the glass.

' How's your girl settling in?'

'She's fine. The studio's set up. We've managed to get Balthazar Maritz and his daughter to book a portrait session. We'll see how things go.'

' She stood up rather well to the interrogation, I thought.'

Max nodded, he couldn't speak, he couldn't do or say anything, shock had set in, and Poulsen's inclined head took longer than normal to bounce back. The time he took to bring his glass to his lips was the same as leaves rotting from young Jacarandas.

Poulsen leaned forward, and Max knew the time had come.

‘ We’ve had word, from Operation Mignon.’

‘ Yes?’

‘It’s not good news, I’m afraid.’

He felt that Poulsen watched him almost hopefully, but Max refused to make things any easier. Eventually Poulsen sighed.

‘ Vivienne … well they’ve had no word. She’s missed her last three scheduled radio communications.’

‘ I see.’

‘ Look, it could just mean she’s on the run. Who knows.’

Max stared at the wrinkled board that passed for a ceiling. The wind had died down, the hag next door’s typewriter keys had ceased. Silence bore down heavily on his eardrums. It felt as if Poulsen barely breathed, which was appropriate for a messenger of death, Max supposed.

‘ Of course we all know the risks of being in occupied France, Vivienne’s resourceful, one of the best. Eugene speaks very highly of her.’

‘He would, wouldn’t he?’

‘ Come on, Max. Water under the bridge. Chin up. We’ll hear from her soon enough. Head office wanted you to know. They’re not obliged, of course….’

‘Thank you.’

Max flinched against the pity bedded in Poulsen’s gaze. Rage drove through him like a freight train; he directed all of it towards Poulsen, without saying a word.

‘ Best female agent we ever had.’ Max felt gratitude that Poulsen was awkward. He also noted the ‘had’ and poured the whisky down his gullet without it touching sides. He stood up, and smiled.

‘ As soon as we’ve made contact with Balthazar, I’ll be in touch.’

Poulsen nodded.

It was when Max reached for the slimy door handle that Poulsen posed the question Max knew was coming, ‘ Your girl Janis, she doesn’t speak French does she?’

Lightening seared the sky as rain began to pummel against the windows. Max smiled. 'The Gestapo would smell her from Dover.'

He closed the door quietly behind him, and slid into the rancorous night. The rain lashed at him as he turned right on to Jeppe and then made his way up Eloff street. He heard the melancholy call of the saxophone before he saw the narrow doorway with the sign *Gamma Sigma Jazz Club* above it. A weeping chalk sign next to the door read; 'One night only, the Shantytown Sextet, featuring the legendary Kippie Moeketsi.'

Max slid in, and made his way through heavy smoke to the bar, where an African woman with an impossibly low cut dress asked him what he wanted. He turned to watch a man almost doubled over splayed legs, in the throes of bringing his instrument to a grinding climax. He acknowledged to himself that the man did indeed have a talent. Then his bottle of scotch arrived, and he proceeded to take the first sip, straight out of the bottle.

***

Janis focused the lens so that it closely framed the peculiarly sharp features of Balthazar Maritz. His hair was thick and wavy, slightly too long, a dark blonde. He had dressed in a simple black suit, of good quality wool. Johanna, his daughter was demure, strangely so for an eighteen year old girl, in a dark purple silk dress, which reached almost to her ankles, the neckline high. She had inherited her father's features but none of his glamour. While her father was effete, Johanna looked ungainly, and almost masculine, with her heavy jaw and protruding forehead.

As Balthazar placed his hand on her shoulder, Janis moved away from the camera and approached them.

' Mr. Maritz, what kind of family portrait were you considering?'

He inclined his head, and the corners of his mouth quirked upwards.

‘ By that I mean, do you want something formal? You’re certainly both dressed that way. Or would you like something more relaxed. For example, you could both sit on armchairs next to one another …’

He smiled.

‘Formal would be better.’

‘ Of course.’

Once again, she noticed the accented English, it was neither German nor Dutch, but something in between. He’d studied German and English at Heidelberg University in Germany, she knew. Lucas, her camera assistant, slipped into the room to give her a telegramme, and then left.

‘Please excuse me…’ Janis opened the orange envelope.

Darling, have stolen some leave. Stop. Arriving soon. Stop. Can’t wait to see you. Stop.

‘ Good news, I hope?’

'Oh, yes, my husband's on his way back from North Africa,' simpered Janis, and then she cursed herself silently for sounding so.

Balthazar did not think it was too much however and he gave her a generous smile. 'It's hard enough for a woman to be alone these days.'

She glanced at the photograph of her and Max on the boat at Port Sudan. The boatman had done his job, two people laughing at one another, framed against a bright blue sea. Balthazar followed her gaze, and nodded. 'A lovely picture.'

' I'm so terribly sorry, how unprofessional of me. Please, Mr. Martiz, let's get back to planning your portrait.'

Balthazar took his silent daughter and steered her into a chair, and then he stood behind her, placing a large hand behind her neck.

' I think, like this.'

'Lovely.'

Janis slipped back behind the camera and guided them as to where to look. As she carefully focused her lens and took a few photographs, giving them instructions, Balthazar's hand never left his daughter's neck.

‘Try looking this way, Miss Maritz.’

Click, click, click.

Johanna blinked almost continuously against the flash.

‘Smile, please.’

After a series of shots, Janis gave in to her driving urge and captured Balthazar’s thumb, which on occasion would tap his daughter’s leaping vein.

Johanna was clearly tired, and Lucas was hovering just outside the door, his flat cap on, his smoke stained tweed jacket slung over his shoulder, Janis knew he wanted to leave. She moved away from the camera and approached.

‘ I think that’s enough for tonight. Let me develop these and bring them over …’

‘ I’m afraid that won’t be possible.’ He smiled, a placid upturning of lips, gleaming teeth.

‘ Of course, I’ll telephone you when they’re ready, should I?’

‘ That would be better.’

He draped Johanna's coat over her shoulders.

Janis smiled warmly at the girl, ' Thank you for your patience, you're a very attractive girl.'

Johanna merely turned and slipped her arms through the coat sleeves.

' I'm afraid my daughter's not very fluent with English, and so speaking it makes her self conscious.'

' Of course,' she smiled, noting this fact whilst seeing them out.

Once they'd left, through the entrance hall, and disappeared into the thunderstorm soaked night she told Lucas he could leave.

'Thank you, Madam.'

Lucas opened the servant's door and was about to move off the step and onto the street, when a drunken lout stumbled into him, stopping him from doing so.

'Sir, please …'

Janis heard, rather than saw Lucas's protestations and moved back to the door.

‘Lucas…’

Janis saw beyond Lucas, a swaying man who belched, and began to mumble incoherently.

‘Lucas!’

He tried to shut the front door on the man,

‘ Just get him out of my doorway, will you. Then you can go home.’

The man stumbled, once more and groaned. Lucas grabbed him by his coat collar. As his head lolled backwards, Janis realized it was Max Skinner, drunker and shabbier than she had ever seen him.

‘My God! Get him inside, quickly.’

‘But Madam, he’s … he could be dangerous…’

‘He’s my husband, back from the war, not another word, get him upstairs, now!’

Janis watched as Lucas dragged the unconscious Max up the narrow stairs. It was too late to tell Lucas not to put him in her bedroom, of course he would put Max there if

she'd said he was her husband, and he was meant to be. She followed swiftly, and ordered Lucas to remove his shoes, which he did, more carefully than Max deserved.

Once Lucas had left, Janis sat on her bed next to the prostrate form, and stared at him.

'Max? Max!'

He began to snore.

'What the hell d'you think you're doing?'

The snoring continued, in, out, in out, in a comfortable rhythm.

She lay down and turned to watch him. A thin trickle of saliva dribbled from the corner of his mouth. She closed her eyes.

Janis remembered James leading her through the darkened passage towards the snoring, it got louder the closer they got, his hand over her eyes, his other hand gently steering her forwards. She couldn't speak; she couldn't dare wake up Father. Eventually James removed his hand. In the gloom, she made out the naked form of a man, an empty bottle of gin with its liquid soaking into the pale blue Persian carpet beneath him. James laughed softly into her ear.

Max's snoring grew and grew until it coalesced at the back of his throat choking him awake. He looked blearily at her for a split second and then closed his eyes again.

Cursing, she went into the other room, which was tiny, not much larger than a bathroom, curled up on the two-seater sofa and struggled to go to sleep.

Chapter 12

Johannesburg October 1942

Janis woke early, before dawn, stiff from sleeping awkwardly. She went into her bedroom where Skinner lay, his hands folded over each other neatly, as a priest.

'Max, Max ….'

She jiggled his arm, and eventually smacked him hard with her fist on his chest. To her relief, he flinched. Then he lifted his head off the pillow, without opening his eyes.

' How much do I owe you?'

' You owe me clean sheets, and a bloody good explanation,' she shouted.

Max opened his bloodshot eyes. His breath rank, his smile was deathly.

'Morgan, missed me did you?'

'Like Cancer. Where the bloody hell have you been?'

‘ Waiting in the wings, pulling strings, had to get Maritz to buy into a portrait. I can’t tell you everything, never have, never will, you know how it is …’

‘ So, the drunken lout behavior, is what?

‘That was me … taking the initiative, and …’

He reached out, and gripped her wrist too hard.

Immediately she pulled out of his grip. He lay utterly still for a moment and then began to groan, his body juddering, as if collapsing into himself. She quickly left the room and made her way down the stairs. Breathing deeply, she struck a match, and lit the stove. She placed the kettle on top of it.

She remembered being sixteen and waiting, behind the Acacia, trying not to laugh. It wasn’t long before she heard James thundering towards her. She stood up, and ran around the trunk, I’m here. James grinned, slapped her shoulder, the bruises around his mouth and eyes, fading, about to heal. They made her flinch. James, flung an arm around her shoulders, brushed his other hand across his damaged face. Come on, Monster, its not that bad.

Janis made the coffee and then carried it back up the stairs. She was about to re-enter when she heard a rasping sound. She listened. It could be crying, but after listening a few moments longer she realized it could also be vomiting. She walked back down the stairs, sat down and drank Max Skinner’s coffee.

***

A few hours later, Janis let Lucas in, and noticed that he avoided eye contact with her, even more than normal. It had taken her by surprise, initially, the custom of South Africans not to look their employers directly in the eye. It apparently denoted respect. Janis didn't mind, Lucas had been well educated at a Catholic school, could read and write and seemed to have a fairly affluent uncle who owned some freehold land in the Alexandra township.

It had not taken her too long to train him in how to work with the various chemicals she used, how to clean the developing trays, and handle photographs. Although he did not handle them often, she'd still felt it necessary to train him how to do so. Lucas had a bicycle and would deliver her photographs to either *Libertas*, or even sometimes *The Star* newspaper. They'd published a few of her desert war photographs.

Janis set about developing the photographs of Balthazar Maritz and his daughter, and found it inevitably frustrating. Neither of them had ever seemed to look directly to the camera simultaneously. In one photograph, Johanna stared woodenly into the middle distance with her father looking down and slightly to the left, as if distracted, and wanting to be somewhere else. The only photograph in which Johanna smiled was the one in which Balthazar had his thumb on her neck. He stood, looking down at his smiling daughter, his thick hair obscuring his face. All in all, the portrait session had been a waste of time. Janis wondered anxiously whether he would even be prepared to pose again. He may feel it would be better to go to another portrait photographer, given the extremely mediocre images she stared at.

Lucas gave his timid knock on the door.

'Wait.' She called, slightly irritated at the intrusion.

‘Darling.’

Janis slid out of her dark room and came face to face with an extremely pale Max. Lucas hovered in the background, fiddling with dirty trays, not looking directly at them, but his entire body supremely aware. So Janis gritted her teeth and hugged him. Max held her close, and with her nose jammed into his neck, she could still smell alcohol beneath the sharp smell of soap.

She moved away from him and headed towards the small lounge at the front of the flat. Max followed her, and embarked on some friendly banter.

‘Lovely studio, darling, I’m thrilled for you. Thank God your Papa was prepared to fork all this out now. I’m terribly sorry about last night, it’s the down side of being in the desert, I’m afraid …..’

It was only once she’d closed the door behind him, he stopped nattering, and sunk into a frayed armchair.

‘Do you trust that boy?’

‘Yes. He’s smart.’

‘ Too smart for his own good, he was clearly listening.’

‘Perhaps he’s worried about what my husband’s going to do next.’

'Well he doesn't need to worry, does he, it's none of his concern.'

The October summer sun struggled through the dirty front window. Janis closed her eyes, against the dirty light, the agitated man and her anger, tinged with tiredness inside.

' I don't know what went wrong …' She finally said, '… but that can never happen again.'

'Believe me, it won't.' He stared at her, unblinking. She knew to wait for an apology would be useless, so she stood up.' We may have a problem,' she said and led him back to the dark room.

Max examined the photographs carefully, and then finally pointed at the image of Johanna smiling.

' That's the one. Hand deliver it.'

' Well, no, it's appalling, he's not even looking at the camera ….'

' Exactly, but his daughter is.'

' Balthazar doesn't want me to hand deliver them.'

‘Rot, Morgan, he’ll probably fall over himself to welcome you into his parlour. The man’s been a widower for years.’

‘I want to organize another session. I can’t present these photographs in good faith, as my best work.’

‘Fine.’

‘ And it’s another opportunity to build something between us.’

Max nodded, and attempted a smile, which quickly petered out. He turned and slipped his jacket on.

‘ See you later.’ He opened the lounge door and turned back as Lucas passed, ‘ Darling.’

She was gathering her stuff together when Lucas approached.

‘Madam, my uncle, he’s looking for a job.’

‘I’m not sure I can help, Lucas. I don’t have a job to offer him.’

‘Where are you going now, Madam?’

‘Across town.’

Why was he asking, perhaps Max was right, and he was more than he appeared to be.

‘Its just, if you had a driver, you may get there quicker.’

‘A driver?’

‘My uncle, he has his own car, and a licence.’

‘I see. Thank you, let me talk to my husband about it and I’ll let you know.’

Lucas bowed and moved off.

***

Later, Janis took the tram to Judith’s Paarl, North-East of Lorentzville. She travelled from the Newtown station up through the city centre, the day was already heating up fast. The horse drawn cart loaded up with *The Star* newspapers trotted behind the tram before turning to make its next delivery. The tram went past the Markham’s Gentlemen’s Outfitters, the department store on Eloff and Pritchard streets.

She first saw the Markham’s clock with James. They’d stared up at it. It’s monstrous monster. Get it? People walked past in their Saturday finery, jostling them from side to side. She could see Grandfather gesticulating for them to join him. James grimaced. She laughed, you’ll look good in a suit James. That’s if they can ever make one to hide that

smelly body. James frowned. Call me smelly again and I'll paint your hair with ice cream. He took her hand and led her inside.

She finally disembarked at the Tickey Stage tram halt, on the corner of Bertram and Derby streets, and walked up past the neat rows of semi-detached cottages looking for Balthazar Maritz's house. Max had found it suspicious that a man like Balthazar, who was clearly employed with a good job at the SABC lived in accommodation meant for working class Afrikaners. The cottages with their corrugated iron roofs and deep high verandas reminded her of the East end of London. She knew predominantly Afrikaners lived here, and that it was one of the few suburbs created by Afrikaners, the Bezuidenhout family. She found the house and knocked on its pale blue front door. A maid answered and then admitted her. Balthazar was clearly taken aback at seeing her.

'I'm terribly sorry for the intrusion, Mr. Martiz, but I've made a botch up of your photographs and I thought the only way to sort this out was to present them to you in person.'

She handed him the envelope and waited, standing as he perused them. He looked at each one of them, carefully without comment. When Balthazar studied the photograph of his daughter smiling he smiled himself.

' She's not often smiling, Johanna. I like this one very much.'

' But your face is almost entirely obscured, I really think I should take some more.'

Balthazar smiled kindly, 'That's not necessary.'

'I insist. It will be for no extra charge. Since it is my mistake.'

'You're not from South Africa, are you?'

' I'm from Kenya. Nakuru actually.'

'A long way from here. Please.'

He gestured for her to sit, which she did, on a very uncomfortable wooden sofa. He called for his daughter, and she slid into the room.

'Ja, Papa.'

' Asseblief, my kind, maak die dame tee.'

'You would like some tea, wouldn't you, Mrs. Morgan?'

'Thank you.'

Johanna went to the kitchen and Janis slid into what she hoped would be a demure request for another photograph session.

' Mr. Maritz, I'm sure you're a busy man …'

‘Some of us are not so busy, in this war …’ That warm smile again.

‘Well, perhaps not, but it would really make me feel a lot better if I could do this all one more time.’

He inclined his head. ‘ Since you’re so insistent ...’

‘ Well, pleading rather than insistent …’

‘I apologise, you’re not unladylike.’

She smiled, trying to loosen her stiff jaw.

‘Johanna and I can come any time next week.’

‘ Thank you so much.’

Once again, she wondered whether she’s been too enthusiastic, but he appeared to be relaxed and not on guard at all. Johanna came into the room carrying a tea tray. Janis immediately went to help her, which seemed to meet with Balthazar’s approval. When Johanna sat down, Janis made sure she sat down next to the girl and took a sip of the tea.

‘Very good. Thank you, Johanna.’

The girl smiled, it was large and strangely lovely.

'Johanna doesn't make tea often, of course it's not our custom … but for the English …'

' That's extremely kind of you, Mr. Maritz. I really mustn't intrude on any more of your time …'

Janis took a few gulps of hot tea, and looked up into eyes that were studying her more closely than she had first realized. It sent a tiny pulse of alarm down her spine. She kept her breathing steady, and scanned the walls looking for something mundane to talk about. Her eyes alighted on a photograph of a Boer woman, clearly from the early 1900's. The woman had the same heavy brow and jaw as Johanna.

'Is that your mother?'

Balthazar did not turn around to see which photograph she meant. Clearly he already knew.

' Yes. She died at Koffiefontein.'

'I'm sorry.'

' You know what Koffiefontein was?'

Janis had a vague sense of recollection. It seemed to be a fierce wind to the fire inside Balthazar.

'Earliest memories of my life. I know it's not something you British like to talk about…'

Janis scrabbled hastily in the recesses of her mind, a sense of desperation gnawing.

'Twenty-six thousand women and children dead.'

'Pa!' Johanna interceded softly. Clearly Johanna understood more English than Janis had first assumed. She went on haltingly;

'Of course there were British who did think it was wrong. Emily Hobhouse …'

Relief spread. 'Emily Hobhouse revealed the full terror of all those camps, Mr. Maritz. I hope you don't think all of us wanted the death of your people. '

Balthazar smiled. ' Nation.'

'Miskien wil die dame nog tee he, Pa?'

Janis did not understand what the young girl was saying, but she was clearly trying to steer her father away from a troubling memory.

‘We are a nation, Mrs. Morgan. Not just a people.’

Janis placed her empty teacup on the small table next to her; she noticed the carefully crocheted cloth that was draped over the top of it. ‘ Of course.’

She stood up, and Balthazar rose with her. ‘Forgive me, I have kept you for too long.’

‘Not at all. I shall see you next week, shall I?’

She held out her gloved hand to him, and he touched it, gently.

Later that afternoon, when Janis unpacked every detail of her encounter with Balthazar Maritz she couldn’t stop thinking about his excessive gentleness. She told Max about it.

‘When you’re watching someone so acutely, it’s as if you take them into you through osmosis. It’s good and bad. Good, because it gives you strong intuition, bad because you sometimes see what’s not there. You will never know what the man thinks even thirty percent of the time, and that’s if you end up sleeping with him.’

‘Is that part of my job?

He lit a cigarette, shook the match until the flame died, a small smile quirked at one end of his mouth. ‘Probably better if you don’t. Since we’re trying to get to the bottom of what his band of brothers are up to, you’ll need your wits about you.’

Balthazar's lurking pain unsettled her, Max's hooded statements and bizarre behaviour still made her wary of trusting him in the way she knew she should be able to. She watched at he smoked with his eyes closed, the glowing ash growing.

'What's going on, Max?'

His eyes remained closed. He took another deep drag from his cigarette. 'War, my dear.' He opened his eyes, smiled at her, and unfolded himself, stretched to stand. He chucked the smoking cigarette into the dull green ashtray.

'We're on track, with Balthazar Maritz, so far so good.'

'Do we need a driver? Lucas has an uncle who has worked as a chauffeur, apparently.'

Max shrugged. 'Possibly, let's interview the chap.'

A couple of weeks passed uneventfully, and still Balthazar did not contact her. Nothing had prepared Janis for how to manage the normalcy of every day life. She still had to wake up in the mornings, and photograph people. She still had to cook and stand in long queues to buy her food. She had to do all this with a sense of the unexpected lurking around the corner. Max kept to himself, he often went out at night, but never again came home drunk. He called her darling in front of Lucas and would occasionally make her tea. Other than that he kept himself holed up in the small second room.

One night, Max brought home some radio transcripts. He tuned her radio, fiddling with the knob until he found the station he was looking for. It was scratchy and the male voice sounded hollow and distant. Janis sat hunched close to the radio.

Max lit a cigarette. 'Listen to the tone of voice. See if you understand anything.'

The man was speaking Afrikaans she supposed, she could make out a few words here and there. His voice built to crescendo, resonant with conviction.

'This is not tonight's speech, obviously,' Max referred to the transcript of her lap, 'but I wanted you to get a feel first. Now read them.'

And she did.

The Jews are the thieves of our land. They have stolen our gold and our women and degraded them. If I walk down the city streets on any given day and am accosted by the prostitutes, it is in my own language by the fallen women of my nation. This is what the Jews have done; by enslaving our women they're destroying our future. By running our banks and our Industries, they collude with the English to keep us downtrodden, they are gluttonous for they take what is ours, not theirs.

And all our people they've jammed into camps, which are nothing more than the same camps where they let our women and children starve to death. Where when we came home from war, we found our future, hopeless and diseased as our land. And these are the very same people who want us to go to war against Germany. These people, who when this war is over will be content to run our country and enslave our women to Jews. Let us pray. Let us pray to our God to keep us safe, to give us

the courage to fight against the tyranny of the Jews and the English. Whether that may be in small groups of men who risk their lives in the dark of night, to destroy the symbols of British oppression, or whether it's in the loyal brothers of the nation who are interned and tortured, for believing in our just cause. Let us pray for ourselves, trapped in the web of deception. Let us keep strong and hold our beliefs close to our heart. Good night.

She finished reading the transcript almost at the same time as the radio announcer finished his speech. Silence followed. Max turned off the radio, and turned to her.

'That's Radio Zeesen.'

'What is it exactly?'

'It started as a cultural radio station, funded by the ADK. The Afrikaans-Duitse Kultuurvereniging.' He stumbled over the long words. 'It's been usurped by the Ossewa Brandwag. The Nazis back it now, with money and a say in the content. '

'Is it used to send messages?'

Max shrugged, 'we have a man in Lourenco Marques who has intercepted some messages, very crude code though. The man you were listening to is Erik Holm.'

'Balthazar?'

'As you know, he works for the SABC. He writes news reports, he's a trained proofreader. The director general, Gideon Roos, was instrumental in setting up the Afrikaans service. He's a Nationalist, but went to an English university. He has said on the record the news should be about reporting not propaganda. We think Balthazar is operating outside of the SABC's orbit, possibly using some their equipment and know how. He has known connections with Van Rensburg, the head of the Ossewa Brandwag, who openly supports a violent overthrow of government. Everything you heard tonight, and I can tell you roughly what it is, as it's always more of the same, has been written by him.'

'You want me to establish some kind of relationship with him, in order to find the Radio Station?'

'We need to know where it's operated from.'

He opened up a sketchbook and drew roughly and quickly, a series of circles and lines connecting them, a circular timeline. 'First we have the Broederbond, a secret society of men. Men of the community, who meeting to strategise and formulate their inculcation and growth. Nothing wrong with that, everyone's allowed to think his culture has merit. From here we move to the Ossewa Brandwag, a more focused cultural group, started after the commemoration of what they call The Great Trek. It's out in the open. However it's run like the old commandos were organised. Then finally the Stormjaers, the SS equivalent which are set up as a paramilitary wing of the Ossewa Brandwag, more rabid, more extreme. No Union, they want to be self governing, a republic.'

'That Robey Leibbrandt chap ….'

Skinner waved an irritated hand, 'Numbskull, two of his men blew themselves up, he started his own thing, only a handful of men joined, clearly not one of them adept in explosives …..'

'The post office explosion a few months ago ….'

'Correct, a bomb. Visser and van Blerk were sentenced to death in July. Committed Stormjaers. They have the backing of elements within the police too. Three hundred and fourteen cops were arrested after the incident. And after the railway pylon bombs, as well as some power lines …. Over a hundred railway police have been relieved of their duties.'

'What's their goal?'

'Overthrow the government. Make the Union a subsidiary of Germany.' He shrugged, ' you can imagine the rest.'

It all sounded like a brutal underworld boxing match, that she, a lady had no part in witnessing. She shook her head at this thought, suppressing the memory of not being able to force Evans off her in one-on-one combat training. 'Clearly, they despise the whole damn lot of us.'

'Women see and hear things because men assume they're not smart enough to link the dots.'

'I have to get him to trust me?'

Max shook his head. ‘You’re English, he’s possibly never going to. You have the girl, who is motherless. A caring older woman, a substitute mother figure could be just the way in.’

She felt the weight of war suddenly like a lack far more insidious than no silk stockings. An oppression far deeper than a power less curfew. They all roiled into whispers of menace. As if the very same apparitions drifted just behind his neck, Max grimaced.

‘ What if I can’t …’

‘You’re resourceful. I’m not worried about how you get in, I’m more concerned about how you’ll get out, Janis. Balthazar may an educated man, but he’s a fanatic. He’s what all fanatics are, a bodyguard of lies.’

Chapter 13

November 1942

'Mr. Cyprian Shabangu, happy to serve.' The portly man swept a low bow in front of Max, who Janis noted was decidedly unimpressed. He eyed her meaningfully as they walked out beyond the entrance hall and half way down the passageway towards the flat. 'Everyone dating back to the Russian revolution will know we're coming,' muttered Max.

She looked back into the gloom of the hallway, and had to admit that he had a point. Cyprian was squeezed into a dapper green suit. He held his straw hat in extremely big hands. His shoe size was easily a twelve.

'We can get him to tone down. He needs to be discreet, and his car needs to work, surely that's the most important thing.'

'Janis, doing good and saving mankind is not your primary job description at present.'

She ignored him and re-approached the man standing in the hallway. 'Please, show me your car.'

The man led them out onto the street, awash with morning heat and the smell of perspiration. He walked a little way down the road and eventually stopped in front of a shabby black Ford. Max followed and Janis turned to Cyprian. 'Is it possible to take us for a drive? Just around the block?'

'Certainly.'

Cyprian opened the door and she slid into the low-slung back seat. Max climbed into the front, clearly determined to give the man a second driving exam. She wanted to laugh, but controlled herself as Cyprian pulled out and drove down the street. People were hurrying to work. Cyprian drove calmly and easily, seemingly unaware that Max watched him like a hawk. When he had circled the block and pulled back up outside Normandy Court, Max nodded to Janis.

'Cyprian, thank you very much. When can you start?'

'Tomorrow, Madam.'

They watched him pull off and finally blend into the morass of other cars and a straggling horse-trap.

'He's the driver for as long as I say so,' muttered Max.

She began to laugh. 'He stays as long as I say so, he's my driver, not yours.'

The next morning, at dawn, Cyprian, in extremely well-pressed dark blue overalls, drove Max and Janis towards Durban Deep mine.

Anxiety clawed inside her. It was the first time she was to see an informant. Max had told her not to speak, to fade into the background as his wife, but it was still unnerving.

Cyprian cleared his throat ostentatiously, 'Are you working for the mine, sir?' he asked Max.

'Never you mind,' said Max, harshly, she thought.

A gentle wind had skimmed sand from the mine dump and strewn it across Main Reef road like confetti, where it lay golden and glittering like the aftermath of a society wedding. She was so absorbed in the notion it created; of a street paved with gold that the austere steel mine head of Durban Deep loomed above them quite suddenly.

Max had a word with the armed security guards. They waved the car on. Janis wondered how Max could get such easy access to the mine. Max made a dismissive hand gesture. Cyprian nodded. 'You must be a very important man.' He said. Janis wanted to laugh at the sudden irritation that appeared on Max's face. 'I'm just doing my job.' Max said. Janis would have loved to have read Max's SOE job description. She bet he didn't have one. He probably had quite a few.

After driving through the front gates, Max directed Cyprian towards a small, corrugated building near a dark and oily looking dam. 'The slimes dam,' Max told her, 'they dump all the used water there.'

The motorcar pulled up and there was a young man waiting for them by the front door. He seemed nervous, and ill at ease when he saw Janis.

'Piet, how are you?' Max gripped the young man's hand easily.

'Fine,' he said, pushing his hat back off his head. His face was streaked with grit.

'This is Janis, my wife.'

Piet avoided her gaze and slipped inside. They followed and Janis almost gasped at the amount of dynamite that lay stored in neat piles along the entire floor of the shed. Adrenalin began to pump through her; she could feel her pulse hammering in her throat. Piet led them to a clean space on the floor, with dynamite stacked around it covered in grime. He stopped and squatted next to it.

'Thirty pounds went missing, last week.' His accent was Afrikaans, and slightly nasal.

Max squatted next to him. Janis itched to photograph the neat piles of dynamite with the thin light that leaked through the dusty windows right at the top of the building. It would have distracted her from her tension, but Max had given her-orders. No photographs. Piet spoke in low tones, which she struggled to hear.

'They took some last week. I had to divert the security so they could steal it.'

'Any idea why?'

'My Commandant says there's going to be a lot of bombings. More than we've ever seen.'

'Power stations, public institutions?'

‘Maybe. They say also people.’

‘Which people?’

‘People who are against what we trying to do.’

‘British?’

Piet shook his head.

‘You need to get me more detailed information, Piet,’ urged Max.

Piet shook his head even harder.

‘This is my last time I meet with you.’

Max put his hand on the young man’s shoulder. ‘Piet, you have saved lives. You’re the most valuable asset we have. I know it’s tough, but it’s not for much longer.’

‘My initiation’s next week. You know what that means?’ He twisted his hat in his hands, his lips ground together in a desperate grimace.

'We'll get you out before then, I swear.' Max hauled Piet up, and placed both hands down on the young man's shoulders like the weight of the righteous. 'Think of your wife, and your son. This is for them. Here's something in the meantime.' He hauled a pair of army issue boots from his bag. 'You said you needed a new pair.'

Janis slipped out of the door after Max, and was conscious of Piet staring at them, clutching his boots as they made their way back towards the motorcar.

'What did he mean by initiation?'

Max shrugged, 'Apparently to prove your worth in the Stormjaers, you have to shoot and kill a traitor. That's the rumour. The boy's not exactly Richard the Lionheart, so obviously he's running scared.'

'He's risking his life, Max!' she was suddenly angry.

He stopped, and rounded on her, 'Aren't we all?'

'Don't you care at all for anyone?'

'Christ, Janis. Not a lesson in morality, now. I've a bloody war to win.'

He stalked towards the car and Janis had no choice but to follow, fuming. To dig her heels in and continue the fight here seemed pointless. Besides, Cyprian was watching

them both, curiously. She slid into the car next to Max, and almost happily noted the tight set of his mouth. Cyprian drove them home in silence.

Later that night Janis woke up in bed suddenly, wet with a sweaty heat. She'd dreamt of James, being beaten by a faceless and menacing Gestapo. She fell back onto her pillows, thought about going downstairs to get a glass of water, but didn't want to bump into Max. Where was James? Images of his suffering overwhelmed her. Being beaten, burnt with cigarettes, drowned, whipped, taunted. She could almost hear faint threads of their laughter. She gritted her teeth, and reminded herself that the laughter came from the street, and not from anywhere else. James's absence was not that of a person living in another place, but of a positive image removed from a photograph, a space between two trees, stricken with winter.

Was this grief? If so it was entangled with a jaw-grinding hope, that he was still alive. Max had repeatedly assured Janis that her brother was alive. She did wonder though, if Max would tell her if her brother was dead. She closed her eyes, and imagined she could hear Max's breathing, even though she couldn't. It would be even and sure for he questioned nothing about either his own actions or those around him. Janis felt she questioned everything so much it made her run deep grooves in the ground, in which her blistered feet would be forever trapped. She envied Max. She turned over and stared into the hot darkness. Until an uneasy sleep came.

Daylight stole through rusting blinds as Max woke up, his face scrunched face down on the wooden floor. He was sure Janis had deliberately only hired a house with one full bedroom, just to punish him. He heard the slopping of water against the bathtub. She would leave the water in for him. He would submerge himself in the tepid soapiness of her bath and for a moment catch sight of her through the sliver of space between strips of bent wood. Her towel would drop, her body a flash of slick before moving beyond his dirty peephole.

It was one of the highlights of his day, the seconds of illicit female watching, all before the despair settled. Vivienne.

He'd met her after training, on leave from 'The Shop'. Half French, half English, a suitable father, a socially inappropriate mother. Vivienne had inherited her father's cool determination, and her mother's recklessness; it made her a first class spy. It also made her the most unsuitable wife a man could ever have wished for. Still, he'd not realized that for at least two years. What the eye doesn't see, and all that. Except he had seen, one afternoon, in the searing Cairo heat, before they were to be separated, dispatched on different missions, his limber wife with her legs wrapped around another man's buttocks. It was no compensation at all that they were dimpled.

He remembered how Vivienne tried to defend her actions; 'Maxie, he is resistance, if I'm to work in Vichy I need all the support I can get …' they were some of the last words he remembers before she left for France. That was it, for a year. No sign, no letters, just rumours, half-murmured in the sweating Cairo offices. Did you know, she was dropped in utter darkness, only found her contact after a day of hiding in the woods? Did you hear, she was stopped and questioned at the border? Do you know she cut herself, smeared the blood across her mouth and started screaming blue murder? They let her go. Exceptional.

And then, at the T.M.E two months ago, when he had finally got Janis to training, Vivienne re-appeared, gaunt, and drinking far too much whisky. I'm scared Maxie, I know there is a traitor. Tell Eugene, he'd urged, a man with dimpled buttocks should surely be good for something. Max suspected that she never had.

Max had been taught that the strength of women as spies lie in their ability to move through the world prattling prettily, while collating the secrets they gather into a neat cross stitch. But with Vivienne he realised that it was her innate internal isolation that

made her excel. She had never reached out when she'd most needed to. It was now his biggest concern about Janis.

A knock at door, ' Max, I'm finished. You can bath.'

***

Cyprian dropped him off at the gate. Max showed the armed guards his military pass and they opened the gates for him. Max made his way past the mine head, on Durban Deep. The sky was a blazing blue. It burned into his mourning, the air was densely still, and another storm would roll over the city later. He found the dynamite store he had taken Janis to and skirted behind it. An African youth was gathering a whole lot of tools together and jumped at the sight of him. Max held his finger to his lips; the boy nodded, and moved off. Max squatted at the door. And waited.

***

Janis knocked on Balthazar Maritz's heavy wooden front door a couple of times. She knew Balthazar would not be home for at least half the day. Eventually a maid opened the door and Janis asked to speak to Johanna. Johanna came to the door and smilingly let her in.

'Thank you for seeing me.'

'It's all right.'

'It's just, I wanted to speak to you about doing another set of portraits with your father.'

Johanna shook her head. ' No, he doesn't want more.'

'Oh, is there a reason why?'

Johanna shrugged, and smiled in a half embarrassed kind of way. ' I don't know.'

Working hard at appearing stumped, Janis nodded, then smiled back. 'I could always do more of you. Your father really liked the one I took of you.'

She was sounding a bit desperate, she realized. Time to retreat. 'Honestly, I'm sorry. I just get so passionate about my work. The one I gave your father is enough.'

She moved to the door, and Johanna followed. ' Thank you, Mrs. Morgan.'

The maid re-appeared and spoke to Johanna quite sternly in Afrikaans. Janis was taken aback. Johanna smiled.

' She is just warning me my father don't like it when I speak to strangers.'

She hoped her amazement was horribly clear. ' I see.' Then, driving the unspoken message home, she smiled and said, 'Well, one can't be too careful these days, but I'm hardly a danger to anyone.'

Johanna shook her hands in a peculiar up down fluttering way. Clearly, she had read Janis's sub-text. Janis felt slightly relieved. Perhaps she could play this cat and mouse game after all. It surprised her how easy it felt.

They stared at one another, and Janis sensed the girl was curious about her, as if she were some kind of exotic animal, dangerous but intriguing. She stepped forward and gave Johanna her card. 'If you ever want to come visit, please do. I'd love to see you. This war is terrible, forcing us to go nowhere, and do nothing except try and bake cakes with rough flour and count our eggs.'

Johanna smiled her lovely smile. Janis left, frustrated that she'd only taken one tiny step forward.

***

A waiting Max stiffened, the thud of heavy boots kicking sand up, hurried breathing. Whoever they were they ran right past the dynamite store without seeing him there. He swung around the corner and caught sight of two men, in their early twenties, dirty trousers, low-slung leather hats. One had his mouth half open, and two teeth were missing. Where the bloody hell was Piet Nel? Max squatted again, and decided to give the man the benefit of the doubt.

It was not even five minutes later when the youth who'd been collecting his tools earlier came skidding round the shack, shaking, saliva dripping from his open mouth.

'Baas, it's not me, it's not me …'

Max bolted upright, unsure of what to do. The youth obviously assumed he was a foreman of sorts, and he didn't want to disabuse him of this notion.

'What is it?' he tried to flatten his vowels as much as possible.

The youth gestured, and Max followed, concern growing in his gut. The youth half walked, and half ran towards the edge of the slimes dam. There were a few straggled trees scattered around it, fighting hard to stay alive. The youth pointed Max towards one of them. Max approached.

There was a misshapen lump on the ground. At first glance Max thought it could have been a dead tree trunk. But the stench of burnt flesh rose up from it, triggering answering bile which gathered at the back of his throat. He moved cautiously towards it.

He took a split stick nearby and attempted to push the burnt corpse over. It slumped unhurriedly towards him, the mouth stretched, framing blackened teeth in an eternal grin. An arm flopped forward; the twisted lump of a remaining hand fell close to his feet. The youth behind him gasped, and made the sign of the cross.

'It's a sign, baas.'

It was a sign all right, thought Max, staring at the English army issue boots, no longer new, burnt to ash. Max stepped back and walked away, revulsion driving him towards the mine head, the exit and beyond. Set Europe ablaze, Churchill had said. Christ.

***

Janis came home to find Max climbing out of his second bath of the day, he didn't bother to hide his nakedness, in fact he seemed oblivious to it. She noted the whisky glass half propped on the side of the bath, some dregs still present. He reached for it, and poured the rest down his throat. She sensed distress rolling off him, like the water pooling at his feet.

'Piet Nel's dead. Burnt to death.'

His nakedness, almost lurid in this nightmarish moment only served to underline her visceral fear.

'He was right, then.' It was the wrong thing to say, and she knew it the moment it came out of her mouth. He paled.

'It's not your fault, Max,' she hurriedly continued.

'Of course it is.' He slumped on the edge of the bath.

'I'm so sorry, I really am.'

She felt terrible. He was hunched over himself, the bones of his spine pressing through pale skin, his wet dark hair sticking to his sunburnt face. The silence stretched between them. She felt her fear like a thin skein of silk, looping around them both, binding them together. He looked up at her. 'I don't know where it's all going to end, Janis.'

Before she could answer he grabbed the towel from the rail and drew it around his waist. He stood up and began drying himself. She leaned against the doorway and told Max about visiting Johanna, and how futile it felt. 'I hope I haven't wasted your time.'

He shook his head, 'There's always a brick wall that you need to find a way to break down. This is yours.' He gave her a sudden and inexplicable smile, ' I should get dressed,' he said.

Later, after she'd gone to bed, she listened to him move about in the second room, divided by a hallway and swathes of murky silence. She still didn't trust him and it occurred to her that she never would. Not that he would hurt her, she prided herself on smelling violence like a predator senses meat. Why was she here? And what was she doing this for? It was convenient to think it was for her brother, she knew this. What she also knew was that she was living in a cold and angry time and place. A slaughterhouse hung with carcasses, just when there was a gap to walk through, a piece of meat would swing suddenly in front of her, bloodied and incomprehensible.

Janis woke early, and without waking Max she left. Cyprian drove her to Judith's Paarl. After buying him the morning newspaper to read, she noticed the headline which trumpeted; NEW CHAPTER IN DESERT CAMPAIGN BEGUN: MONTGOMERY: I WILL CLEAR THE ENEMY FROM AFRICA. She found a ramshackle tearoom near to where Balthazar's house was and slipped in, ordered toast and tea and waited. From her window seat she could just make out the front door of his house. At about half past eight, Balthazar left home climbed into his motor car and drove off.

Janis stared after him, until he became a haphazard and indistinct speck of motion. Who are you, really? A fanatic, or a father? Can one be both? Yes, most decidedly. She knew better than most about family facades. Every year to the day she turned her mind away from her father's face, grey-boned and penurious through paper-thin skin, his eyes dark holes of confusion and pain. *Please send James in*. But James wasn't anywhere near; he was living the good life in Johannesburg, writing bad poetry about a blonde girl, while she paid her dues at the Nairobi hospital, with its shiny new x-ray machine.

She'd taken her camera to the hospital once, and hurriedly taken a few photographs as he lay in a moribund stupor. It was the guiltiest she'd ever felt. She hadn't developed them. Sometimes she wishes that she had.

Two hours later, Johanna left home and went in the same direction. Janis walked quickly back to Cyprian's car and asked him to drive the same way.

'We following someone, Madam?'

'No.'

Cyprian nodded, changed gears and said nothing for the rest of the trip. Janis knew that she would only have a small window in which to make Johanna like her. She also realised that if she failed it would be extremely difficult to continue with her purpose. She breathed deeply to get a grip on her anxiety. She ran over her approach strategy. Warm, but not gushing, worldly, but still womanly. A solid and stable older sister. God help her, all she'd ever been was a difficult and demanding younger sister. Still, playing a sibling was much easier than playing anything else.

Janis was intrigued when Johanna alighted from the tram and walked swiftly towards Cuthbert's Shoe store. She stood for a moment outside the white building with its rather grand turret, looking into the shop. She hesitantly walked through the front doors. Janis told Cyprian to park around the corner and followed her in to the shop.

'Please, I have no more pairs left.' Johanna addressed an unsympathetic shop assistant.

‘My dear, we’re all in the same boat. Silk stockings are virtually impossible to find.’

Janis approached Johanna and smiled at her warmly. ‘Hello, Miss Maritz. How are you?’

Johanna flinched, and Janis couldn’t work out if it was from guilt, or subterfuge.

‘I happened to find a small shop on Jeppe that sells stockings, I’d be happy to take you there, if you like.’

Johanna was clearly tempted.

‘My driver’s just around the corner, it won’t take long. He could take you home after.’

‘No, I’ll take the tram home,’ said Johanna.

The shop assistant peered down her nose at Janis. ‘It’s no good being friendly to them, they’re very ungrateful.’ She muttered.

Johanna coloured, her lip trembled. Janis smiled at the shop assistant. ‘ Miss Maritz and I are only superficially acquainted, I think she’s right to be careful.’

She took the young girl’s arm and steered her out of the shop. ‘Horrible woman, I bet she’s got stockings under the counter.’

Johanna nodded. ' I read they were keeping them for people they know, and that's wrong.'

'Would you like to see the shop I mentioned?'

Johanna gave a tiny nod, and Janis felt like Christmas had arrived early. Johanna slipped into Cyprian's car and he drove them to the small shop, which stood next to a restaurant of sorts boldly called *The Native Eating-house*. It was almost lunchtime and Cyprian eyed the place ravenously. Janis ordered him to wait in the car while they bought stockings. Johanna was lucky, the shop owner had a few pairs left and Johanna was overjoyed. When they walked back towards the car, there was no one inside it. Janis eyed the *Native Eating-house* suspiciously.

'You can't go in there.' Johanna was slightly breathless.

'He should not have disobeyed me.' Janis was angry. She walked towards the entrance.

'Mrs. Morgan...'

Janis opened the door and walked inside, with the young girl hovering nervously just behind her. It was extremely noisy, as if there were twenty debating competitions all crammed into one tiny space, and it was each and every one's final round.

Men, for they were mostly men, stopped and stared at her as she squeezed her way through the tiny passage in between the ramshackle tables and stools.

‘Can I help you?’

She ignored the apron-clad proprietor and eventually isolated a particularly aggressive sounding group near the back. She recognized the broad back and perfectly pressed overalls.

‘Cyprian?’

‘Miss Morgan, you can’t be here, it’s too dangerous.’

‘Then come, at once.’ She turned and ignoring the inquisitive looks she made her way back to the front of the eating-house and out the door, where an anxious Johanna was waiting for her.

‘Let’s go to the car, unless you want to take the tram home? On second thoughts, I think I should make you a cup of tea first, in order to help you get over all of this.’

Janis walked to the car, hoping Johanna would follow, she did. An extremely chastened Cyprian bounded past her so that he could open the back door for her. She slid in, and Johanna followed. Cyprian got into the driver’s seat, displaying his anxiety slightly too ostentatiously, she thought.

‘Miss Morgan, I’m sorry, I’m very very sorry…’

‘Take us home, please,’ she interrupted angrily.

He inclined his head, switched the car on, pulled into the road and drove them back to Normandy Court in silence. On the way they passed a Jewish family walking down the street. Johanna grimaced when she saw them, but said nothing. When they arrived home, Janis was relieved to see Max wasn't present. She set about making tea and getting to know Johanna. The girl didn't need much prompting to talk about her mother.

'She died when I was very small, I don't remember her. I remember my father being sad for too long. Then my aunt came to teach me. My father didn't want me to go to school, but I ended up having to go.'

'Your English is much better than your father first said it was.'

'My father doesn't want me to lose my culture for the English.'

'How would you do that?'

Johanna shrugged, 'Everywhere is English. The shops, the doctors, the teachers. Some of my education was in Afrikaans, but also some in English… '

'It's hard, isn't it? I mean, you may meet English people you want to be friends with because … well some of them can be quite nice.'

Johanna smiled, 'Some can,' she said. Janis had the fleeting sense she was referring to someone in particular.

'How many English friends do you have?'

Johanna finished her tea, and then got up quickly. 'I must go now.'

Janis walked her through the narrow hallway, and Johanna stopped at her framed photographs. There was a mediocre one she'd taken of the desert at sunrise, full of undulating shadows. Johanna stared at it.

'When did you take this?'

'A few months ago. I went into the desert with a British division.'

Something rippled beneath the girl's smooth countenance. Janis hoped it was envy, a seed that would germinate into a searching curiosity. She smiled. 'You can come and visit me anytime.'

Johanna thanked her as she led the way out of the flat, through the entrance hall and out onto the street.

'And once again, I'm terribly sorry about my driver, he can be extremely impudent.'

The girl shrugged. 'It's not his fault … My father says he is untermensch.'

'That's German?'

Johanna nodded, 'Yes, I speak some. Very little.' She held out her hand, and Janis clasped it, soft and smooth.

'Do come back soon, I get lonely here when my husband goes away.'

Johanna smiled, and then left. Janis noted Cyprian still slouched in the car. He turned and touched his cap. She waved back, she would pay him a little extra tomorrow, for disappearing and creating the diversion she'd asked him to.

As she walked back to her flat she considered the word. Untermensch.

Chapter 14

Johannesburg, November 1942

Max waited as Poulsen spread his hands out, splaying his gnarled fingers. Sun streamed down through the stained glass window of the top turret, haloing the old man in green and red.

'They found her body. Tortured I'm afraid. '

Max closed his eyes. Blood trickle from a nail being pulled, the nauseating pain, the smell of flesh burning from a glowing cigarette. Curly dark hair plastered across her forehead, gasping for breath before being plunged back into the bucket of water. That aristocratic face bruised from all the punches, perhaps one eye swollen shut, and finally, her execution, her head bowed, before the pistol.

Was he on her mind before she died? He ran through each phase of torture, cementing it deep inside as a reminder, knowing that the images he conjured paled into comparison against the torment and loneliness she must have felt. Still, he brought them into the centre of his mind's eye with as much clarity as he could muster. It felt like meagre punishment for his own inadequacy as a husband and a soldier.

'She'll get an honorary mention, after all of this.'

'How do you know she didn't talk?'

'She disappeared three weeks ago. Eugene only found her body, through an informer. The cell is still operational. Dear boy, if there's anything I can do…'

Max couldn't stop shaking his head.

'Compassionate leave. Go back to England. You deserve it.'

'I can't leave Janis.' Was all he could manage to say before he got up and walked through the sweeping entrance of the Rand Club and out on to the sun baked pavement.

***

That same night Max led Janis down a darkened street on the outer edge of the city. By day, she knew Newtown as a bustling hive of industry. Even though the market stood a few roads away still and silent, remnants of its produce lay rotting on the nearby pavement. They went into a small bar, set back from the road, wedged between an Indian Laundry and a Chinese makeshift restaurant. There were a few labourers at the bar, and a song bleated crustily from a wireless propped up at one end. Max ordered two double whiskies and drank them in quick succession. He grinned at her wary look.

'Cheer up, Janis, perhaps tonight is the night you practice carrying your husband home over one shoulder.'

She gritted her teeth at the facetiousness, and asked, 'Why are we here?'

'To meet a man, who can help us with a German spy.'

She nodded, and they settled down to wait.

'Tell me more about your idyllic life.' Max urged, and she sensed an undertow of desperation.

She shrugged. 'I was born in England, Kent actually. We went out to East Africa when I was a baby, after the Great War. I have no memory of England as a child. All I remember is Africa growing up. Of course I went back later, to study. To Surrey University, art and photography. '

What she would always remember is that a sjambok's whip is so fast, it whistles through time and space. It splits flesh, and blood doesn't stick to it. Her father's skinny arm wielding the whistling instrument while James grinds his mouth into the midnight brocade of the sofa. James walking past her, with his wet face. Not now, Monster. It's past your bedtime.

She became conscious of her hands twisting together. Max was staring at her, and she blinked, not knowing how long she'd been silent.

'I'm sorry.'

He smiled, 'You're lucky to have such good memories.'

He looked haggard, in the yellow light. Something was terribly wrong with him, and like the careless slip of a clumsy hand, her world slid suddenly out of focus, the carefully constructed world of Normandy court, polite Lucas, jocular Cyprian, and sardonic Max.

'What's wrong?'

He began to smile and then it twisted into something else. He looked at his watch, stood up. 'Bugger this, lets go.'

'Really? It's only been … half an hour?'

But he was already heading for the cracked yellow door. She had to half run to catch up with him. He walked extremely quickly down the road towards Cyprian's parked car.

'I'll meet you back at the flat.'

And he disappeared into the pungent smelling darkness.

Cyprian drove her home and she went straight to bed. She wondered at how little she knew of Max's life. She knew he met and managed other operatives. He never spoke of any of them, and only informed her of anything if it was absolutely necessary. In spite of all the portraits she was doing, and the constancy of his presence, she felt lonely. The effort of trying not to worry too much about James was beginning to tire. The anxiety about whether she would in fact be able to get anywhere close to Balthazar was taking its toll. She would write to Daisy tomorrow, she decided. It may be just the distraction she needed.

Much later she woke up and rolled over to find Max at the foot of her bed, watching her. She jolted upright.

'What the hell's going on now?'

'I'm sorry. I have to go away for a while. It's not ideal, but I must.'

'Right. And you thought that it was appropriate to tell me now, at … what time?'

He barked a laugh. 'His Majesty's Secret Service doesn't keep time, old girl. You'll report to Henry Poulsen while I'm gone. He's my superior.'

He handed her a piece of paper. 'Memorise the number and the address then burn it. When the hag answers say your uncle is ill and you need some tests run. If they want to contact you, they'll do the same. The moment the call is over you go to this address. Test the old bugger and demand whisky.'

She took the paper and fell back on to her pillows.

'I followed Johanna and managed to engage with her today. I brought her back here.'

'Good work.' He seemed distracted.

'Johanna used the word, Untermensch today.'

He grimaced, 'under-human, directly translated, meaning sub-human. That's what they call the Jews.'

'She was referring to Cyprian at the time.'

'Sounds like you're making progress if she's espousing Nazi racial theory already.'

Janis shrugged, 'if you have a brain, four limbs and a body, you're human. You can't be half a bloody human, it makes no sense.'

His mouth quirked briefly then he got up and headed for the door. 'Be careful, Janis. It's a horrid world out there.'

And then he was gone. She lay, staring into the greyness of early morning light. She switched on her side-lamp and took out her writing pad. She began constructing a letter to Daisy.

Dear Daisy

Hope you're well, my darling, now that the dreadful Rommel's no longer on your doorstep. Are you still fixing wounded soldiers minds and hearts? I'm sure you are. I have had no word from James, but then again, how can I expect any?

Life in Johannesburg is

She stared at the line, and it stared back at her, unblinking as an insolent street cat. She put her pen back down on the page.

Life in Johannesburg is interesting. It's a very modern city, with quite a few smart buildings. My day consists of

My day consists of subterfuge, manipulating situations to generate unknowable long-term results. I'm trying to get close to this man, you see. I think he's a Nazi sympathiser, and he has this lovely daughter who looks rather like a caged bird, well, now I'm being melodramatic, which is not difficult, when all I do every second of my day is try and analyse what people don't say. It's rather like being a mind reader, except one who's a charlatan instead of the real thing.

Janis crumpled up the page, and moved over to her small fireplace where she struck a match and set fire to the letter. As she watched her treacherous words blacken and disintegrate, she longed for the subtle aggravation of Max. It didn't matter, with or without him; she knew she was performing in a hostile circus, balancing on a perpetual tightrope of opacity. Whether she fell and plummeted to her death, or whether she hung on for dear life, there was no guarantee that getting to the other side would garner her the applause of any appreciative audience.

Janis took a bath, feeling miserable, more so than she had in a long time. After her bath she forced herself to eat a piece of toast and drink some tea. Lucas arrived, promptly at eight and began to clean her developing trays. She had a ten o' clock portrait session with Mr and Mrs Somers, and their two children. She went into her small studio and tidied up the room before their arrival.

Lucas admitted them promptly at ten and after introductions she set about taking photographs. The children were small and kept slipping off Mrs Somers' lap, which was tiresome. Mr Somers, clearly thought it all a waste of time and kept on referring to his folded up newspaper whenever there was a tiny distraction; TOBRUK RECAPTURED, GEN. SMUTS VISITS TROOPS IN LIBYA announced the headline.

'Good news.' Janis smiled at him. He merely nodded. 'Yes, although they're predicting a whisky shortage now.'

'Nigel,' urged his wife, 'please, it's not for much longer.'

Janis took the hint and tried to take a few photographs of the family when they were all vaguely looking in the same direction. Once they'd gone, she picked up the newspaper Mr Somers had left behind. It had been folded up on page three. She read the second lead; Commander Dan Swart who led the first South African division in Abyssinia and Egypt will be buried today at two o' clock, in the Nederuits Gereformeerde Kerk in de Korte street, Braamfontein. His Eulogy will be read by the esteemed Mr Balthazar Maritz. Janis leapt up and instructed Lucas to tell Cyprian to collect her at half past one on the dot.

She arrived at the Church, suitably dressed in black. She waited until the bulk of what she assumed were the commander's family had gone inside. She caught sight of Balthazar Maritz and Johanna entering, and then just at two o' clock, she slipped into the back of the church, and kept her head bowed low. The church was extremely full. From what she could gather, the Commander, killed tragically in an air crash had been a popular man, and there had been plans afoot for him to move into politics.

She struggled to understand the bulk of what was being said, and could only make out a few words here and there. When Balthazar got up to speak, there were a few mutterings, and Janis wished she'd bothered to learn Afrikaans to even passably understand it. He spoke well. His voice wasn't particularly deep, but it had a clear resonance. He spoke with compassion for the Commander's widow, and then he spoke at length about what she could only assume was the man's bravery. He seemed filled with passion and sincerity.

After the funeral, Balthazar and Johanna stood near the door with the rest of the family, while the funeral attendants filed out. The body was going to be driven to the cemetery for a military service and burial. Janis made sure she was in the queue that filed past Balthazar, and when she got close to him she held out her hand and greeted him softly.

'I'm sorry for your loss, I had the pleasure of meeting Commander Swart in Cairo.'

He took her hand, and clearly could not place her for a moment. Johanna was clearly rattled by Janis's presence.

'Oh, yes, the photographer, Mrs …'

'Morgan. Hello Johanna.'

Janis gave no indication that they'd in fact spent an afternoon together, chatting in her flat.

'Yes, well, he was my late wife's cousin. But thank you.'

He smiled at someone directly behind her, and the deep embrace of acceptance in that gesture momentarily stunned her. He moved towards a woman who looked as dazed as she felt. Balthazar clasped her hands in his, spoke gently, and gave her such undivided attention and focus that they could have been in their own private world.

Johanna seemed indifferent. The woman moved on and then another woman approached, this time older, and dowdy. Balthazar gave her the same quality of smile and she responded in exactly the same way. What was this indefinable sense that they were all being stroked by the tender hand of a warm God. Because that's exactly what it was, Janis realized.

As he moved back to his daughter that same internal grace was present. He took his daughter gently by her shoulders, and although Johanna did not respond in exactly the same way as the other two women had, she immediately relaxed, she felt safe, Janis observed, in the circle of her father's arms. There was something mesmerising about this man and the way he related to women. She could not put her finger on it, for through a camera lens he was uncharismatic, almost withdrawn. On the other hand, he'd never looked directly at her.

'It was lovely to see you again.' Janis smiled at Johanna and moved on.

As slid into Cyprian's car, Johanna was still looking back at her, slightly bemused. She felt bemused too, but for entirely different reasons. She'd seen an entirely new side to Balthazar, as well as how his daughter felt about him. She'd intended this encounter to show Johanna that she could be a safe haven for the girl. It felt like a very slim attempt to start with, and after seeing how Johanna reacted to her father, a waste of time.

Later that day, her phone rang. She answered it absent-mindedly. 'Morgan Portraiture, hello?'

'My dear, I'm afraid I have some bad news for you,' said a voice cracked by too many cigarettes. 'Your uncle is sick and you need to come immediately. '

'I'll be right there.' said Janis, her pulse speeding up, as she placed the telephone back on its holder.

She turned down Cyprian's offer to drive her anywhere, giving him the afternoon off and walked swiftly in the late afternoon heat until she arrived at *Statton & Statton Quantity Surveyors*. She climbed the narrow stairs and knocked on the door marked 21. A short, thickset woman in her late fifties admitted her and escorted her into a dingy office.

'Tea?' she said, identifying herself as the owner of the cracked voice.

'No thanks.'

'He'll be in shortly.'

Janis sat down carefully on a worn leather seat, and started when she heard the greeting from very close by. ' My dear girl.'

She stood and stared at the slight man, struggling with baldness. He smiled politely and held out a thin hand.

'Henry Poulsen, pleased to meet you, Miss Morgan, Janis.'

'You too.'

She struggled to hide her shock. This was Poulsen? The senior operative that Max reported to? He was nothing more than an innocuous old man.

'Please…'

Janis sat down again and watched as he shuffled over to the drinks cabinet and took out a bottle of whisky, almost three-quarters empty. He poured himself a stiff tot as the lady re-entered and handed her a chipped mug of tea. He waited until she had left before continuing.

'I need you to meet someone for me. A chap called Dice Lotter.'

'Of course.'

'I'd ask Max, but under the circumstances….'

He seemed regretful, which puzzled her. ' Where do I meet him?'

'There's a workman's bar in Newtown.'

'I think I've been there before, with Max.'

'Yes, you were to meet Dice then, but he …. What happened?'

Janis remembered Max's ashen complexion. 'He didn't arrive. So we left.'

'Mmm. Well, Mr Lotter is extremely valuable to us. We've set him up in Newtown and we've received a message that he wants to meet Max, but you'll need to go.'

'What exactly do you want me to do?'

'Find out what he wants, back up everything Max has said or done for him. Make him no promises and revert to me.'

'Of course.'

She sipped her tea, it was lukewarm and weak and tried not to feel rattled by the pale blue gaze of watery eyes; penetrating as a paring knife.

'Any word of your brother?'

'No.'

He nodded.

'I'll get Max to look into it.' It was an attempt at being avuncular.

She was intensely curious as to where Max actually was. She was even more curious about the fact that this old man, knew about James. He took a sip of his whisky, savouring it. She began to understand why Max had made the snide whisky remark. She experienced a strange desire to laugh.

'I believe there's going to be a shortage?'

He grunted, 'Not if I have anything to do with it. Just so you know, Dice Lotter's going to testify at a German spy, Heinrich Masser's trial. It's coming up shortly. Masser was picked up on the East coast, apparently off a U-Boat. So anything Dice wants or needs, within reason, he can have.'

'Does he have information on the Ossewa Brandwag?'

He nodded. ' He's been invaluable. How's your foray into that world going?'

'Slowly.' She admitted. 'Perhaps it would have been better to use an Afrikaans woman.'

'Probably. Couldn't find one though. There's a strong sense of urgency with these zealots. It's making Whitehall nervous. Have you made any more contact with Maritz?'

'Yes, in fact I went to his wife's cousin's funeral today.'

Poulsen barked. It could have been a laugh.

'It felt like the right thing to do.'

'Did it pay off?' She felt his curiosity brush like a burn across her face.

'I'm not sure. Yet. Hopefully.'

'We're running out of time, my dear.'

'This is a waiting game. Max has told me this is how it will be until I can get closer, without raising suspicion.'

'Yes, but can you? This is not the Muthaiga Club, these are crass and brutal fellows. I emphasise fellows. I am not, like our esteemed Prime Minister, a believer in using women in this field,' he shrugged, 'Needs must.'

Janis sat quietly as her rage rose up within her like a whipping tide.

'I know it's not the norm, but …'

He handed her an envelope, and spoke across her. 'Lotter's cash. He gets it every week. If there's any need for any more, give him more and we'll reimburse you.'

'If there are any issues, you can call this number, day or night.'

They shook hands again. His grip was hard. He turned away as she left. When she walked down the stairs it occurred to her that in their entire exchange he had not once smiled, or even stretched his lips into the semblance of one. As she walked home, in the gaudy sunset, her rage, now a gutted aftermath subsided inside her.

She got home, and Lucas had left already. She went into the darkroom to find the trays were neatly stacked, and positioned side by side. She poured developer into one and cleaner liquid into the other. She switched off the light, and took this morning's spool of the Somers' out. She slid it beneath the developer machine, and pushed her eye into the lens. She stared at the images, absently. Normally she could lose herself in the images of others. A mouth stretched open against the torment of war, the innocent outstretched palm of a young child, the irony of the street urchin in front of the Pyramids, their pain became hers, their delight, their confusion, and their mourning.

As she stared at the absent minded father, the anxious young mother and the restlessness of their two children, she could feel no connection to the young family. The only thing she became conscious of in the dark redness of her safe house was her jaw clenching, her heart beating steadily in her throat, and the unpleasant sweaty undertone of her very own fear.

She left the darkroom, and picked up her telephone. From memory, she dialled the number of Poulsen's secretary, but she couldn't bring herself to even think of the word the hag had given her.

The next evening, Janis went back to the same small bar, set back from the road, wedged between an Indian and a Chinese makeshift restaurant. She'd deliberately dressed as shabbily as possible. Still, she felt exposed as if everyone could tell she wasn't who she was pretending to be.

Janis waited at the end of the bar for a good half an hour before a man entered, exceedingly tall, and shabbily dressed. He saw her and approached, pulling up a bar stool and clearing his throat. They sat avoiding each other's eyes. He seemed ill at ease, and said nothing. She noticed his bitten fingernails, and rough hands. His thumbs circled one another restlessly, and when he finally spoke, it was with a faint German accent.

'I did not know Max is married?'

'Yes. It was rather sudden. We met in Cairo.' She stuck to her planned cover story easily.

'I never been to Cairo, I came here by ship. From Rotterdam.'

She smiled. 'Would you like a drink?'

Dice gestured to the barman and he brought a beer, which Dice proceeded to gulp down quickly.

'I have heard that Masser will go on trial soon. Sooner than planned.'

She didn't know what to do so she took Poulsen's advice and waited. Just when the silence became almost unbearable, Dice spoke.

'I need protection.'

'And we are giving it you.'

'No! I need more. I'm being followed.'

Dread unfurled inside her. 'Can you tell me who?'

'Men.' He shrugged. 'Max swore to me that after I testify, I'll be sent to Canada.'

'Whatever Max has promised, he will deliver. How long have you been followed?

'Ever since last week. The lawyer told me they were moving the trial forward, but won't put it in the Newspaper. So then, how do these men know?'

She tried to control her fear. 'I don't know. Look, I will speak to my superior, and tell him you need to be moved as soon as possible.'

'Out of Newtown.'

'That's out of my hands, I'm afraid.'

Dice nodded. Janis slid him an envelope.

'That's your weekly payment. Don't go home. Find somewhere else to sleep tonight. Contact me tomorrow on the usual number and I'll bring you up to speed.'

He nodded, stood up and left. After waiting for a few minutes, Janis left the bar, stepped out into the night and made her way up the street towards Cyprian's parked car. As she walked she heard a scuffle, a man's hoarse scream, and then nothing. She froze. Something was wrong. She turned back and made her way back to the bar. The street was empty save for a few drunken men. She went back into the bar under the guise of leaving something behind. She double-checked the area where they'd sat. There was nothing, and so she left. She began to walk in the direction opposite direction to her first route, because she hadn't seen Masser, she assumed he must have walked this way. There was no sight of him. Her jaw began to ache from tension, and she forced herself to breathe slowly. Two men suddenly flitted across the end of the road. They stopped and then turned to walk towards her.

Janis turned around and began to walk fast in the other direction, back towards Cyprian's car. Their footsteps got faster and so did hers, but they didn't break into a run, whereas she almost did. As she half walked and ran she slid her hand inside her thin

evening jacket and felt for her small knife. She gripped the handle and slid it out of its sheath, held it down by her side. The road curved slightly and there was a narrow street between two buildings, which she slipped into. She pressed herself against a rough wall as the men walked rapidly past her hiding place. She waited, adrenalin thundered through her like a rattling tram and she felt as if the echo of her own fear resounded for miles. After a while she slipped out and back up the road.

Two hands grabbed her from behind, one over her mouth and the other gripped her upper arms. Without thinking she brought her knife up and stabbed the man in his arm. He grunted with pain and faltered, and she began to run. He staggered after her, shouting now, shouting in Afrikaans. Her breath sticking in her throat, her lungs burning, the familiar nausea she always felt from running threatening to overpower her. This time, I really am going to die, she thought, except from vomiting and not because of the war. He grabbed her again and swung her back round to face him, she stumbled, and fell and wanted to burst into tears as the knife clattered out of her rubbery grasp and on to the shadowy street. He clutched her upper arms, pulled her upright and smacked her hard across the face.

She reeled, and staggered, and saw that he was coming at her again. She saw the glint of her own knife just before she felt it pierce her flesh. The pain lacerated through her, and her hands clasping her side, slipped in her own blood, she felt faint. She heard shouting in yet another language she didn't understand and more feet running, but she keeled over before she could ascertain whom any of them were.

As she panted and retched, two large hands helped her up. 'Madam!'

Cyprian half dragged, half carried her to the car, where he pushed her inside and drove off. She dimly realised there was another man who ran after them for a part of the way before tailing off to be swallowed by the night.

‘Take me home,’ she ordered Cyprian.

‘Yes, Madam.’

But she could see from the way he was driving that he wasn’t going anywhere near Normandy court. He pulled up outside a small building with jaunty Brookie lace and got out of the car and banged on the door. A few moments later another African man in his pyjamas opened the door and came to the car with Cyprian.

‘This man is a doctor, he’ll look after you.’ Cyprian told her.

‘No! I need to get home.’

The man had opened the car door and was peering at her closely through thick glasses. He grabbed Janis firmly by the wrists. ‘You need examining.’

Janis kicked him hard, and he grunted as he staggered back.

‘Cyprian, get me the bloody hell out of here.’

Cyprian grabbed her and pulled her out of the car. ‘You’re wounded. Madam.’

He hauled her towards the house, while his friend got up off the road, and walked after them. Cyprian helped her inside and it did indeed look like a doctor's waiting room. The man walked in after them, and began remonstrating with Cyprian in an African language.

'He says he can't help you if you kick him again.' Cyprian told her, firmly.

She felt like death and now that the adrenalin had faded her side burned and ached. 'I told you to take me home, Cyprian. And I expect you to do just that.' She tried to stand upright and failed.

'My dear, I'm a doctor in tropical medicine, but I'm sure I have a vague idea of how to stitch and dress … a knife wound?'

His voice was deep, and his accent had rounded English vowels. She was in no condition to go anywhere. The last thing she should do is draw attention to herself and she realized that Cyprian had inadvertently given her a way back to obscurity. She nodded, and then slumped into a chair. He approached, and held out his hand. He took it and he led her into the consultation room, which was small and a vibrant shade of buttercup yellow. There was no lampshade and a mournful bulb swung from the ceiling. She fell on to the bed on her good side. Above the bed a certificate was mounted skew on the wall. Dr. Xuma, it appeared had his Bachelors in Medicine from Cambridge University. Perhaps he was a doctor after all. He ripped her shirt open from the bottom of the arm to the end and set about cleaning her wound.

Chapter 15

December 1942

Janis walked stiffly into Poulsen's office, her side still burning with pain. He didn't wait for her to sit down and the secretary didn't offer her tea either, Janis noticed, before he launched into a scathing attack.

'What the bloody hell were you thinking? Chasing after men down dark alleyways in the dead of night wielding an effing knife? Did you also have a patch over your eye, and a bloody telescope?'

'Sir, they tried to kill me. What did you expect me to do?'

'Be covert.'

She felt overcome with rage. She suspected it was still the aftermath of shock but the unfairness of his attack was unwarranted.

'Sir, I apologise if I have compromised this operation in any way, but I simply had no other choice.' Her throat hurt from the effort of controlling her anger. ' It was them or me.'

'This cannot happen again. If it does, we'll have no choice but to abandon the entire thing. Any idea yet, of where those Jerry radios are run from?'

'Not yet. Sir.'

Poulsen directed his cold rage at the peeling ceiling but Janis felt the directness of it as clearly as if he'd struck a dart towards her heart.

'You have two weeks. I'm bringing Max back, he can grieve for his wife when this is all over. That's all.'

Janis stumbled into the glare of summer and allowed Cyprian to support her into the back of the car. As he drove her home, the buildings flitting past her like squat ghosts, she began to sweat. Max was mourning his wife. Did that mean he'd recently lost her? Of course that was what it meant. How on earth did he manage to have a wife and not tell her? Then of course, why would he have any reason to tell her anything? It was none of her business and a security risk. She forced down the terrible hurt she felt, it made her impossibly angry with herself. Max was and had always been out of bounds, whether he was married or not made no difference.

Hearing the news had torn a skin off all the pretensions of how she felt about him. It embarrassed her terribly to have the extent of her care, her desire and her need for him laid bare. Like a distasteful joke, she wanted to turn her back on it. But now that the sticky wound of her love was visible, she knew that there was no getting away from it. The extent of her vulnerability towards this man made her tremble. Did he know? She bloody well hoped not.

She also felt utterly humiliated by her failure to remain inconspicuous. Poulsen was right, this was not her area of expertise. But the thought of Max coming back, and releasing her from her duties with pity and resignation made her feel ill. She could not allow that to happen, it was unthinkable that she would fail.

'Madam.' Cyprian stilled her frantic thoughts. 'How are you feeling today?'

'A bit better, thank you. Thanks to your friend.'

Another alarming thought occurred to her, that Cyprian's doctor may be loose-mouthed. Her thoughts raced and tumbled over one another, a cacophony of paranoia.

'Cyprian, I need to pay him, I'm sure?'

He shook his head. ' It's all sorted out, Madam. He will come and collect his money from you when he changes your dressing.'

'You really did save my life, Cyprian. If there's anything I can do to return the favour…'

Although what that could be she had no idea. He smiled at her in the rearview mirror.

'I have a house in Alexandra. It's new. Very smart. Perhaps if you took some photographs?'

'I would be honoured.' She said, before thinking through what it meant for a European woman to walk the streets of an African township.

***

Johanna had prepared food for the meeting. As she cooked she thought of the word, firebrand. It was a word her father often used in relation to her mother. Was Mrs. Morgan also a firebrand? She had gone into the desert by herself. But she was English. Johanna knew it was fruitless to go any further thinking about her. Papa would not approve.

As the young men started to arrive, Johanna greeted them all, one by one. She'd grown up with many of them. Piet Nel was the only one who hadn't appeared.

'Where is Piet, Papa?'

'I don't know, my dear. Please make the coffee.'

But she did not miss the warning look Oom Eric threw her father's way. He thought she was sweet on Piet. She wasn't. she thought about their last conversation together about what South Africa would be like if it was a Republic, and no longer a slave to Britain. 'Just like the sky is so blue it has no end. Just like the land is so vast your eye can never see the edge of it. That is what freedom must feel like – expansion without an edge,' He'd told her once, breathless in the winter dusk, before this intractable war had started. When they could fly their flags freely, and without fear of being rounded up and put back into Concentration Camps.

He'd put a heavy arm around her and drawn her close to his chest, smooth, hairless and warm. 'Maybe one day, when I've finished my trade ….' But she pulled away from him, uneasiness suffocating her. His embrace felt like a man beginning the taming of his puppy.

'I'm sorry, Piet. I'm going to give my life to God.'

He was impressed, and she felt ill with the lie. She had no intention of giving anything of herself to God, other than respect, love and duty. When Johanna lied to Piet it felt like it was the devil speaking, but she had long ago realized that the devil was a busy man. He rode the hearts of the English. He couldn't possibly also be in her heart and mind all the time. There were times when she thought deeply and encountered only silence. The lie Johanna told made Piet treat her with respect, not completely equal to a man, but as close to as it as possible. Johanna knew then, in that moment that she would have to be very careful about the lies she told, she could only tell them when she felt heart alone.

She had once seen photographs of women archers at the 1923 Olympics. They were skirted warriors. That was who she really was inside her linen dresses, capable of aiming her arrow to the heart of any prey. As Johanna washed the dishes and listened to the men's deep murmurs through the walls she thought it would not harm anyone if she paid a visit to Mrs. Morgan, one last time.

She opened the kitchen window, knowing that her father's study next door would be half-open to allow the cool night air to thin out the heat of the day. She perched on the deep windowsill and put her ear to the edge of the window. She could hear Oom Eric talking, and every now and again someone would interrupt.

'The transmissions are becoming more risky. A church in Cape Town has been raided and their radio confiscated. So the information I tell you now you need to disperse to all your own men. It cannot go out on the wires.'

Her father took over, his voice thick with pride. 'We have a visitor coming to the farm soon. A man of great stature, high up in our comrades' secret army. He has already arrived by U-Boat off the coast of Port Elizabeth. '

'His mission is top secret, but it means a greater involvement of our Commandos. Get your men to stand by. We will feed information as to and when is necessary.' Oom Eric took over from her father.

The solemn silence seemed to permeate through the thick walls and embrace her. Johanna murmured the prayer along with them.

If I retreat, kill me. If I die, avenge me, If I advance, follow me.

***

The next morning Janis sat in the back of Cyprian's car and tried to suppress her shock at what she witnessed through the windows. Tiny shacks, made from corrugated iron lined either side of a makeshift, grimy street. Rubbish, old tins, paper bags, the offal of meat and what she could only assume was sewerage coagulated in shallow pits at uneven intervals on front of the houses. Children ran in the streets, shouting, some dressed, some partially so. Lucas was watching her and so she tried to keep her expression as neutral as possible.

As the shacks got fewer and fewer they turned a corner and drove down a street that had small houses built on either side, similar in design to the miner's houses that edged the south side of the city. Whitewashed walls, with corrugated iron roofs, and small porches at the front of each house. They stopped outside such a dwelling, with a tract of sand around it and a meagre vegetable patch at one far end. Cyprian climbed out and opened the door for her.

Janis busied herself with her camera, in order to camouflage her uncertainty, but Lucas kept staring at her, openly curious.

Cyprian wanted to pose standing on his porch, so Janis stood on the bottom step, pointing the lens upwards, capturing him in a proud stance. She framed the picture so that the house looked like a small abode on a vast tract of land, on either side, stretching out of frame and into supposed infinity with the landowner dominating the foreground.

When they went inside she was impressed with how neat the rooms were. But when she articulated this to Lucas he seemed offended. Cyprian seemed to admonish his nephew in Zulu some way, and when Janis tried to find out what the problem was Cyprian waved it away with a massive hand. 'Don't worry, Madam. These young boys, they think they too smart for white people these days. But not Cyprian.'

Cyprian referring to himself in the third person seemed to irk Lucas even more but he turned away from Janis and busied himself with boiling the kettle on the stove for tea. When they all sat down around the table, Janis took some more photographs of Cyprian pouring tea into enamel mugs. She noted Lucas sitting slightly apart from his uncle, frowning slightly at Cyprian as he stirred sugar in his tea, his little finger raised.

It was quiet inside as they sat around the table, but Janis could hear children shouting beyond the house and the eerie echoing bark of the dogs. She was eager to get home and develop the roll as soon as possible.

'I need to go and see Dr. Xuma again, Cyprian, to get my dressing changed. And then, I need to pay him.'

'Or course. We'll go on the way home.'

'He's an important man.' Lucas said, finally meeting her eyes carefully.

'I'm very grateful to him for being able to help me.' she said, wondering what Lucas meant by important. Once again Cyprian became sharp with Lucas in Zulu but this time Lucas answered back. An argument broke out between them. She felt out of her depth here, and in no way in control of anything. She only had herself to blame for agreeing so readily to come. She stood up and cleared her throat. Cyprian leapt up and they walked back into the heat to the car.

Dr. Xuma greeted her with a measure of reserve and she did her best to be cordial.

'I really appreciate you looking after me, Dr. Xuma. May I pay you, once of course, you've changed my dressing?'

He nodded and bowed slightly, she almost missed the quirk on the right side of his mouth. He led her through to the surgery room and she slid on to the narrow bed. When she hoicked up her shirt and he began to remove her dressing she remembered her

father telling her that if an African touched a white woman it was bound to drive him crazy with lust. She flinched. He stood very close to her and she could see the pores of his cheek as he bent forward and cleaned her wound. She gritted her teeth against the pain of it and wondered whether she would know if Dr. Xuma was overcome with lust. His hand was steady and his breath even. When she paid him later, and once more expressed her thanks he told her he may have cause to call on her one day soon.

Janis had just arrived home and was about to begin developing the photographs when there was a knock at the door. Lucas opened it and admitted Johanna. When Janis watched the young woman cross her threshold, her training, Poulsen's vitriol, and Max's fierce unpredictability all became worth it. Johanna had come to her.

Johanna maneuvered herself carefully away from Lucas, putting as much distance between them as was possible as they both walked down the narrow passageway. As if creeping alongside the far end of the wall would keep him from soiling her in some way. Lucas, acutely aware of her disdain, clearly resented her deeply. It gave Janis a swift sensation of liquidity, the second she knew she was witnessing something powerful, and worth capturing. She held up her camera, focussed and pressed fast down on the shutter.

Johanna was shy at first, but Janis made her tea and chatted waiting for the girl to relax. Eventually she did and Janis wanted to capture her with Lucas again, but wanted to do so in as natural a way as possible. She decided to get them into the small portraiture studio, Lucas under the guise of helping her to set up a scene.

Johanna seemed flattered that Janis wanted to take some more photographs of her and became animated. Janis asked Lucas to place a box on the ground, and when Johanna climbed on to it, Lucas held it still. Janis caught the image, an African man, of the same age, on his knees in front of a young Afrikaner woman.

Lucas wedged the toe of his shoe under the box, causing it to tipple. Lucas's hand snaked out and gripped Johanna's as she stumbled off the box. Janis slyly captured the brief moment, their clenched hands central in the image before their swift movement apart, like guilty lovers as opposed to two people sharing nothing but hatred.

'Don't touch me, he touched me!' Johanna turned to Janis, full of outrage.

For a moment Janis did not know what to do. She looked at Lucas, who stared back at her with a defiance so slight, she couldn't be sure if it was a reflection and nothing more.

'I'm sorry, Madam. The box was unstable.'

Janis avoided Johanna's incredulity and smiled at Lucas.

'Yes, I saw that, thank you for helping Miss Johanna.' This time it was his turn to look incredulous. Janis briskly thanked him and told him to take the rest of the day off. She wondered whether he would one day give in to his complex emotions and express them, or whether he would be able to achieve the inscrutable expressions of servant-hood that Cyprian had mastered.

Finally, Janis and Johanna sat down to tea, and, Janis hoped, a girlish gossip. It soon appeared to be nothing of the sort.

Chapter 16

Johannesburg, December 1942

Johanna questioned Janis quite pointedly about her time in the desert, and seemed intrigued that Janis was the only woman in an entire regiment of men. Janis glossed over her experiences, not wanting to shock the young woman. Johanna pushed her for details.

'Where did you wash?'

'For a lot of the time, there was a makeshift shower, a small tent with a bucket that you pulled down over yourself. Only one every two days, to preserve water. We were all very grimy, to say the least.'

'Did you sleep alone?'

'Yes, I had my own tent. The men all shared.'

'What kinds of photographs did you take? Did you see any Germans?'

'Only when they flew overhead and bombed us.'

Davy's expressionless face swam in front of her, and it made her feel angry at Johanna's invasiveness. She stood up.

'This must be very boring for you.'

'How many dead people did you see?'

The question was as unexpected as any she could imagine coming from this seemingly protected young woman's mouth.

'I'm sorry?'

'You saw dead people, soldiers?'

'Yes.'

Johanna's ghoulish respect rubbed against her like an abrasion.

'It was sad. Terrible in fact.'

'When my Papa was small. Very young, six maybe. He saw his mother die in front of him.'

Janis felt confused by the turn the conversation had taken, knowing it was the shift into a closer relationship. Except not the way she had foreseen it would happen at all.

'I'm sorry. How terrible for him.'

'Yes. It was at Koffiefontein.'

'The Boer Concentration Camp?'

Johanna nodded. 'She was in the hospital. With some disease. They brought him in to see her, and she was very thin. My father remembers only being hungry there. She didn't recognize him. She smelt horrible. When the nurses turned her over, a lot of flies few up from underneath her … She had all these sores on her back. My father remembers being covered in the flies and it made him frightened. He ran away.'

'How frightening for him.' Janis could see the horrifying image.

'He never saw her again. Well, he saw them carry her body away and throw it on the back of a horse-cart. But her spirit had already left.'

'I'm sorry.'

Johanna seemed transfixed, reliving the experience as if she were her father and not the receiver of his bleak and loveless story. Janis sat absolutely still, not wanting to break

the moment, macabre as any war tale. Johanna seemed to shake herself out of the moment and focus on Janis. 'I try and give him what he has given me.'

'I'm sure you must be a great comfort to him.' but Janis was puzzled by what she meant.

'That is why I listen, and support him. Because my father has known nothing but suffering. My mother died when I was small, and it was the same for him.'

'You must have been so lonely.'

'I have never known more dedication than the love my father has given me. He has been my mother and my father. And so, this is how I repay him. By taking in his pain as my own.'

Johanna's words resonated deeply with her. Rationally she felt they were on some level not dissimilar. What else was she after all, other than a scavenger preying on the suffering of others. She hoped that she didn't celebrate her scavenger status as openly as Johanna. But then, it was this self-same status that the girl had obviously identified in her and made her seek Janis out.

'I am, like all women, the gatekeeper of the hearth. My father calls me that. I want to be more than that. I want to be like you.'

'I'm not sure that you do. I mean … I'm English after all.'

'It doesn't matter to me.'

Janis could see that it honestly didn't. Max flung the door open and breezed through it, at his faux expansive best. 'My darling, miss me?' She felt stunned. She had thought that Poulsen would have just contacted him, yet here he was already. He must have returned of his own accord.

'Darling, Johanna here is my new friend. Johanna, this is my husband, Max.'

Johanna looked as if she'd been hit by the weight of all the Boer wars all over again. Janis sensed it was realizing that she had a husband. She moved swiftly to smooth the girl's apprehension. 'You must come and visit me again. In fact, when my husband goes back, ' she threw Max a warning glance, 'we can spend more time together.'

'That's right. Ship in the night, and all that. Old girl.'

Johanna looked slightly more appeased but said nothing other than thank you when Janis saw her out.

When she went to find Max he was shoveling the chicken stew that Lucas had cooked and left for her on the stove.

'Hello Max. Sorry about your wife.'

His spoon smashed against the plate. His slippery fingers gripped at it and he cursed as it slid to the linoleum floor. She picked it up, ran it under the tepid trickle of water, and handed it back to him.

'Poulsen?'

'In a manner of speaking.' She shrugged. 'I know it's all hush-hush, but I really am sorry.'

Janis had never seen anyone more bereft as his exhaustion caved in to grief. She could not stop herself and held him close. He buried his head into her neck, and she held him like that for a while.

He slid his hands down the sides of her body, one hand across her wound and when she flinched he stepped swiftly away from her.

'It was … I was knifed. By my own one, I' m afraid. Poulsen was furious.'

'Why?'

She shook her head. 'He asked me to meet with Dice Lotter. Lotter was worried he's been followed. It turns out he was right.'

'Where is it?'

She lifted up her shirt to show him her side, the cut stitched and dressed. He stared at it strangely she thought. She felt self-conscious holding up her blouse, and quickly dropped it and moved away from him.

'Is Lotter okay?'

Janis shrugged. 'Poulsen hasn't heard from him again. I hope so.'

'Christ. He was going to testify for us against that Jerry spy that came in off a U-boat. The bloody man's gone missing. At least Poulsen can't blame that on us.'

'We're not doing so well, Max, are we?'

He shook his head. 'Seems like you've made some progress today?'

'She's beginning to trust me.'

He half smiled at her relief. 'If you can survive being stabbed, but manage to keep your eye on the objective, then you're doing better than we could have hoped for.'

Janis hoped the energy in his voice was pride. She felt self-conscious.

'You'll want a bath, I expect.'

As she passed, he held her arm and guided her towards him.

'It's good to be back,' was all he said before he kissed her.

He slid his hand back into her shirt and cupped her breast. It felt as if he'd been thinking about doing it for a very long time. She knew she should stop him but she wanted to feel immersed in him. She put her head back to allow him to kiss her neck, and then closed her eyes to trap the tears. She had imagined him doing exactly this for so long. He started pulling at her clothes. She stood immobile, suddenly struck with shyness and, not sure if he should continue, he stopped.

She stared into his eyes. He stared back as he always did. It made Janis realise that Max hardly ever avoided her gaze. Could she see the very essence of him? It felt like she could. He was waiting for her to tell him whether she wanted to progress. She ignored the whisper that told her to be sensible and slid up onto the kitchen table, pulling down her stockings and knickers and then unbuttoned his trousers. His breath was a shallow intake. Sound fell away. Silence pressed down against her eardrums.

She slid her hand inside his underwear and reached for his penis, almost hard. She sat back, her bare buttocks sticking slightly to the plastic tablecloth, as she opened her legs and pushed him inside her. He held her tight, kissing her hungrily. It ripped open her greed for him. She curled her legs around his back, pulling him more deeply into her, and he groaned and began to move and soon she was moving with him and before long he gave a muffled shout into her shoulder as he spurted inside her.

She gripped him so he would not move away, and bit down hard on a whimper she could feel spiraling into an unrepentant scream. In some other part of her she hoped to

God this would not make her pregnant, and then everything coalesced into a brief and effortless darkness.

She lay back on the table, and he lay heavily over her, his stomach pushing into her solar plexus every time he inhaled. The lights went out and a siren sounded far away in the distance. With her legs and arms around him she held him tightly, fighting the urge to tell him how much she had missed him. He groaned and lifted himself up onto his arms, shifting his weight and warmth away from her.

'I feel like an old man.'

'You are an old man.' She giggled.

He stood up and fumbled for matches. He struck one and lit the paraffin lamp. His trousers pooled at his ankles. He stepped out of them and walked naked from the waist down, still with his shoes and socks on, to the cupboard to pour them each a whisky. Janis got off the table, and leaving her torn stockings on the floor.

They made their way through to the small lounge. He sat down on the chair, and crossed his legs while she sat opposite him in the old leather chair, curling into its inanimate embrace. He said nothing, staring at her in the flickering paraffin glow. It made her anxious. So much for the intimacy of slapping flesh loosening all boundaries between them. They had broken the most fundamental rule. She knew he'd wanted it as much as she had. What she also feared was that it meant more to her than it did to him. Janis wanted to curl herself into Max and never speak again. As he continued to watch her openly her anxiety grew. She tried to control herself and exude a cheerful nonchalance.

'Where was your wife. I'm sorry, of course you can't tell me. I just … It's hard to imagine that you were ever married.'

Max cleared his throat. 'Strangely enough, my wife thought the same thing.'

Janis realized that the grief he so palpably carried with him was perhaps not only about her death.

He said. 'We started out in Cairo together, then she went to France. Well, they split us up actually.'

Janis was silent, filling in the blanks. 'The dark haired woman at the T.M.E?'

'Yes. Can I sleep with you tonight? I'm getting a bit tired of the floor.'

She sat on her sudden happiness and laughed. 'Of course. No snoring.'

He took her hand. 'No more than you do.'

They walked up the stairs together.

The next morning she woke up early, and watched him as he slept. He seemed frail, half-curled around his twitching dreams. She wanted to take a photograph, but didn't. This

time, she knew better. What did it all mean, if anything at all? How was she meant to navigate this wary intimacy they had fallen into?

Janis remembered James seeing her off on the boat to Southampton when she went to England to study. How will I survive among the English, James? I'm going to be a nut-brown hick. She was an earnest girl with no practice of understatement, or cynical smoke blown humour. James ruffled her hair. When in doubt, ask for pink gin and aim for normality. She slid carefully out of bed.

****

Max faced an irate Poulsen over a tardy plate of bangers and mash and decided that this lunch was an exercise in self-restraint.

'I'm no fan of women on the job. Good God, look at what happened to Vivienne.' Poulsen began to cough, with embarrassment Max sincerely hoped. 'Christ, Max, what a bloody tactless thing to say. Sorry, old boy.'

'Yes, it was.' He said, not wanting to let the old man off lightly. ' Janis is different however, she's not in nearly as much danger as Vivienne was.'

'She was stabbed in Newtown. Hardly what I'd call living the high life.'

'She's making good progress with the Afrikaner girl. I think she may very well find some way of getting in there, after all. The woman was with Janis when I got back to the flat

yesterday. 'She's brave.' He added. It slipped out, and it felt like a horrible admission of affection. Poulsen studied him. Max hoped there was no realization in that hooded stare.

'The thing is,' Poulsen flicked his long index finger nail against his thumbnail and sucked on his teeth, ' These circumstances would never have been sanctioned before the war. Living together, behaving like man and wife. All it creates is confusion.'

Max nodded, pushed the sensation of Janis reaching for his penis out of his mind, and smiled. 'She's found Maritz's weak chink, his daughter. When she finds a way in, we may be able to get more than we imagined. I'll be in touch.'

He stood up. 'Thanks for lunch.' Poulsen nodded vaguely, already raising a finger for the waiter to bring his whisky.

Max walked back to the flat. The day was hot and airless, oppressing him in the same way that Poulsen had. He weaved across the road, incurring angry hoots, barely aware of the fact that he'd crossed in the middle of the street. Max knew if he were in any way decent he would tell Janis that sex could never happen again. That nothing could ever happen between them. There was after all a job to be done. He was avoiding mourning his wife by taking advantage of a young woman's affection. Because it was all coming from her, as it always had.

He arrived home, noticing that he even thought of it as such, and found Janis boiling rice on the stove. He did not stop to think as he turned her around, slid his hands over her buttocks and kissed her neck. One last time wouldn't hurt anyone.

Over the next few weeks, they slid effortlessly into a routine of bathing, eating and sex. Or was it the other way around? Max wasn't sure. He decided that sometimes analysis was overrated and had told an amused Janis as such. Summer continued with its biting brightness and fierce storms. The war seemed to grind on inexorably, whisky supplies grew sparse as predicted, and there were more blackouts. Janis took a flurry of portraits of mothers and children; their fathers had become increasingly absent. Max realised one day that Janis tried hard not to capture the worry riven on the wives' carefully composed faces as they hugged their children close. He sat in her darkroom, and watched as, when she read the unmistakable sighs of grief strengthening through the rippling developer she would put the photographs to one side. She would search hard for other images that told the tale of a happy family. Her absent father portraits she stored carefully in alphabetically marked folders, for after the war, she told him.

'After the war' was the only thing Max could never say to Janis, as he poured water over her arms and watched the tiny hairs flatten. He wanted to. He wanted to say, after the war, you and me, as he wrapped her glistening body in a towel. He wanted to say after the war we could, or after the war we will, as he watched her sleep. Instead he said none of these things, and merely lay on his back carefully not touching her as if it would stop him from admitting the truth to himself. When he woke in the night gripping her fiercely he would roll away quickly, fearful she would wake up and know.

Janis made contact with Johanna who had been away at her father's farm. Max met with Poulsen and gave him scanty report-backs and tried to contain the old man's growing suspicion that he was hardly doing his job properly. Max lived on the same precipice as every foolish man. He knew it would only be a matter of time before he and Janis would be wrenched out of their secret world. Just as surely as the war raged on the resonance of it, like unhappiness would rain down on them, drenching them in loss.

Chapter 17

Johannesburg February 1943

As Janis developed her photographs of Johannesburg in the heavy grip of war, she realized it had been a month since she and Max had grabbed at one another at the kitchen table. General Eisenhower had taken control of all the Allied forces in North Africa, but still it felt as if more and more troops were being sent up north. The latest was the newly formed Sixth Armoured Division who was sent to Egypt for training. If the allies were gaining ground it certainly did not appear that way to Janis.

The summer burned on and the thunderstorms gained increasing weight and fervour, they had lived secretly, almost happily enacting the daily rituals of duplicity. As she recalled small moments, here and there, Max's unguarded barking laugh, his sly humour, his need to fold his clothes in neat piles she smiled. Then, as always, guilt threaded through her, insidious and demanding. James. Where was he? Was he still alive? Max had sworn to find out, but there was simply no information available. Other than the increasingly frightening stories of Nazi violence and atrocity. These were mainly aimed at Jews as opposed to prisoners of war, Max would point out to her, but it did little to appease her anxiety.

Johanna had become a frequent visitor, and in those times Max would disappear. Janis felt a suffocating unease at the friendship, because that's what it felt it had become. The young girl's apparent adulation was embarrassing. More to the point, it was embarrassing without much gain. Janis had to yet to establish the whereabouts of Balthazar's farm, where the Radio Zeesen broadcasts were being held. Those transmissions of fire and hate had spread from Jews and the English to encompass Africans. The last transmission spoke of a General Trotha, based in German South-West Africa, who'd fought a fierce and victorious war in early part of the century. Long dead

now, his quotes were resurrected and wheeled out with increasing regularity. Erik Holm smoothly stated that the only way to remain in Africa was to, 'destroy the African tribes with streams of blood. Only following this cleansing can something new emerge, which will remain.'

Janis felt queasy when she'd read the transcript. War was one thing, but these quotes celebrated a lascivious cleansing through murder.

It frustrated Janis that while she read these transcripts, and knew that Balthazar Maritz had a hand in the creation of them, his daughter remained unconcerned with matters such as Eugenics. Janis could never work out of she was being deliberately obtuse, or whether she genuinely had no idea. The one thing that was very clear was that Johanna adored her father, but in such a fierce, maternal way that Janis often began to wonder about the validity of the intelligence she'd been given.

'Don't bother reconciling the separate truths, because you'll drive yourself mad. When you're with Johanna, accept her truth at face value. When we discuss her, then know it's our truth.'

Max had given her lectures at length, but Janis struggled to accept this. There must be a mid point at which Johanna's truth and her view of the world met. Janis knew it would not be an amicable fit but she felt strongly that the meeting point existed, and would ultimately be revealed. Max warned her against wishing for this. He admonished her on wanting to change the girl's mind. Janis denied this and felt irritated at Max appearing concerned. People could change, she knew this very acutely.

One afternoon Janis met with Johanna in Joubert Park for an afternoon walk. The trees were spindly, and being whipped in a pre-storm wind, when the young woman dropped the bombshell Janis had given up waiting for.

'Could you take some more photographs of my father, and me?'

'Certainly.' Janis quickly replied. 'As you know, I've always wanted to redo the portrait of you both.'

'Well, these are different, he doesn't want a portrait, he wants re-enactments.'

'Re-enactments of what precisely?' Janis was intrigued.

'The destruction of the Afrikaner.'

'Yes, of course.' Janis breathed evenly as her world slowed down

And she waited. Stepped back in her mind, sensing the young woman's anxiety, her need for Janis's approval.

'I suggested you, but …'

Janis knew that to speak now would be to lose everything she'd worked so hard for. And so she waited, trying to keep her face elastic, she didn't want her smile to settle into rigidity.

'My father is uncomfortable about it, because you're English.'

'Well… I was certainly born English, but I've spent my whole life in Kenya, and Johannesburg, I don't feel English.'

Johanna smiled gently. 'Who do you support in this war?'

Janis knew she had to be truthful, but was painfully conscious that it may cost her further access if she was too truthful.

'I do think Germany were wrong to invade Poland. Having said that, they did have a raw deal after the war, and Hitler's done some remarkable things. But, why does it matter, Johanna, you and I are not fighting the war?'

The answer seemed to satisfy Johanna. 'I told my father you are a photographer, a good one, and that's what we need.'

'I'm happy to help you, in any way.'

Johanna looked relieved. 'I'll tell my father.' Pride lit up inside her. 'He's put me in charge of taking these photographs. In fact it was my idea. Would you mind coming to his farm, you would have to spend a few nights as it's quite far out of town.'

'Not at all,' said Janis, 'I'd be happy to.'

***

Janis had already packed her overnight bag when Max told her not to go. Incredulity engulfed her. He was cold, almost as harsh as he had been when she'd first known him.

'You're simply not ready. I told Poulsen you may fuck it up.'

She flinched at the obscenity. But it was more than the word that made her feel hot and sick, it was the sentiment.

'You cannot be serious. This is what we've been working towards for months.'

She grabbed her bag, and walked down the stairs as he followed. 'I'm going. Johanna's sent a car for me.'

'Take Cyprian, then.'

'God almighty, Max, don't you trust me?'

Max slumped. Janis could see the grooves running down either side of his mouth. Had they always been that deep?

'Your brother, they've made contact with your brother. He's alive.'

'And you only tell me this now? How long have you known?'

Max shrugged. He rubbed his head making his hair stand up on end. A bitter anger rose as she realized he must have known for some time. Lucas entered and told her that a car was waiting for her, and Janis thanked him. She turned back to Max but he was already making his way back up the stairs. It felt like a slap in the face. She said nothing and closed the door quietly behind her.

They drove for an hour or so. As the city slipped behind them golden grass thickened alongside the road peppered with tiny purple bouncing wild flowers. She breathed deeply, trying to calm the almost unbearable tension within. This was the moment she'd been waiting for, news that her brother was alive, and the proof of trust from Johanna.

Janis felt a sharp loss at Max's lack of belief in her. His acerbic view on the world made her tired. She had never believed that life was any more than a combination of good and bad, her father had taught her that. But Janis still hoped joy at least, could prosper. Max's callous choice to tell her of her brother's survival at the very point she was due to embark on her mission appalled her. It demonstrated the level of his manipulation. The past fragile weeks, the sense of abandonment she felt with him, dissipated with the realization that their affair was nothing more than a way for him to pass his time and assuage his boredom.

Johanna was waiting for her at the gate. She opened it, flushed and excited. She slid into the back of the car with Janis and issued instructions to the driver in Afrikaans. Janis pulled her mind away from Max, held the knowledge that her brother was alive tight and focused on the young woman next to her.

When they arrived at the simple but large single-story farm house, Balthazar Maritz greeted her courteously, he gave a small old fashioned bow as he took her hand. His eyes were warm as he welcomed her.

'Johanna speaks so highly of you, Miss Morgan. We are grateful that you were prepared to make this trip to indulge our … trip into the past.'

'I am only happy to help.' Janis felt the brush of his charm once more, except this time it was directed at her and she found it intensely disarming.

Johanna took her to her room to unpack her overnight suitcase. The room with its thick white walls and small window was a cool buffer against the searing heat of the late afternoon. Janis gathered her equipment together and went to find Johanna and Balthazar. They were seated on a long, wraparound porch, with cool concrete floors. Johanna gave her a drink of water and Balthazar began his briefing.

'We wish to re-create some pictures of the last war. Where, your countrymen committed terrible atrocities. This is why we thought it would be prudent to use an English photographer. We do not want to be accused of propaganda.'

Balthazar smiled at her, and Janis struggled to disbelieve him. His voice was deep and resonant. Not as compelling as Erik Holm's whom she'd heard on repeated transmissions, but it had a similar hypnotic quality. Balthazar turned to his daughter and spoke to her in Afrikaans. Johanna responded eagerly. Once again Janis was struck by the love between the two, somewhere deep inside envy involuntarily unfurled.

' We are all put on God's earth for different purposes.' Balthazar gave her the direct stream of his charm once more. 'Johanna believes your calling is photography. She has told me of your photographs of war. I am curious as to why you are drawn to this?'

Janis smiled carefully. 'I look through the lens and I see something that's beautiful, and I want to capture it. It's not necessarily beautiful in a pretty way, it's the beauty of two people who love one another, like yourselves, or a mother with her child, or ….'

'You think there is beauty in war?' Balthazar remained polite, but an edge had crept into his voice.

'I think that war is terrible. But the responsibility to capture it honestly is where beauty lies.'

Janis did really believe that, but had never before expressed it in such clear terms. It seemed to satisfy Balthazar who nodded.

'Tonight we'll have dinner, tomorrow, your work will begin.'

The dinner table was simply dressed. Johanna was flushed and busy overseeing the cooking. The meat from a springbuck shot by Balthazar Johanna proudly told her, was being prepared for dinner. They all sat down later and Balthazar delivered a prayer, first in Afrikaans and then in English for the benefit of Janis. It was potent and moving. 'God, bless what we have, help us to cherish what we are, and what we will still become. Guide us through darkness to wisdom and keep us safe. Amen.'

Janis picked up the cutlery and her knife sank into tender, richly seasoned meat. She drank small amounts of red wine. Balthazar's stories, accompanied by Johanna's mirth threaded around her solidifying her within the circle of light cast by the flickering candle-light. A servant stood just outside the cast of the light, ready to pour wine, clear the plates and bring clean ones with fluffy pudding and sweet desert wine. She felt rich with warmth. When they stood up to go to the lounge, Janis tried to bring herself back to earth and remind herself of why she was here, but the atmosphere of the warm night made her feel languorous.

'Believe their reality, when you're with them. Don't worry about anything else.' Max's words came back to her. And so when Balthazar gave her his arm, Janis took it easily, and walked with him to the porch where he lit a cigar and offered her a seat.

'Tomorrow we will be asking you to photograph re-creations of suffering and death. We have actors prepared and I hope it will not be too stressful for you.'

'Not at all. I look forward to it. Well, you understand what I mean.'

Balthazar smoked as he stared across the expanse of his farm. The sun had just set. Inky blackness descended. Stars clustered heavily in the arching sky. Cicadas chirped in a slow, definite and deafening aria, underlining the heavy heat of the night. Janis swung

gently on the wooden rocking bench. When Johanna brought them coffee and sat next to her father and he gave one carelessly tender brush of his hand across the back of her head, Janis felt happier than she had in a long time. Later, when she went to bed she didn't know whether she'd imagined the tenderness in Balthazar's eyes as he wished her goodnight, or whether it was the wine creating illusions.

She woke up early the next morning. Eager to get going she bathed and took her equipment on to the porch in order to get it set up. The sun was just up, and it's pink glow slid fingers of light across the field. Janis felt compelled to capture the image.

Later, Johanna came to tell her that the actors were ready. They were all dressed in clothes from 1899. Janis took some standard portraiture photographs of them and then Johanna and Balthazar began to distress their clothes. Using damp soil and colouring agent Johanna created the illusion of a woman covered in blood. Janis then had to capture her crawling in the mud.

Balthazar produced a young boy who was fairly thin. He ripped the boys shirt and took off his trousers. Balthazar instructed the boy to twist his legs and create the illusion of rickets. Janis captured this too. Then picture after picture until her mind's eye was filled with impressions of women and children starving, suffering and tortured. She felt bewildered by the bizarre nature of the exercise. She was unsettled by the fact that she felt as disturbed by photographing these constructed pictures as she did by capturing real impressions of war. By the time she had captured the last image she felt drained.

While she was preparing for dinner that evening she stood sweating in the light in front of her mirror. She was suddenly afraid she would not be able to go down to dinner, and appear to enjoy it as she had the previous evening. She opened the window and climbed onto the deep windowsill, pushing her head out into the night. She breathed in the cooling air. She had become so used to the weather that she could smell a storm coming.

It calmed her down. It was then that she became aware of two men talking. Hurriedly she switched off her lamp. She listened. All she could hear were murmurs. And when the voices became more distinct they were conversing in Afrikaans. One voice was Balthazar's. It had lost the languorous cadence and had a rough edge of agitation. The harsh, guttural sounds of Afrikaans lent an intensity and fervour to his speech patterns. The man he was arguing with seemed even more agitated. When Janis heard Dice Lotter's name, she realized that she had been holding her breath. Dice Lotter, the man she went to see, the man who had disappeared, the night she'd been stabbed. Panic rushed through her. Did they know Dice had gone there to meet her, had they seen her? God Almighty was this entire charade a ruse to get her here? She was immobilised by her own fear.

There was a rapid knocking on the door, and it was Johanna, summoning her to supper. When Janis opened the door she felt sure she had rampant fear lurching across her face. But Johanna didn't respond to her in any other way than normal. As they made their way to the diningroom, Janis mentally backed herself away from the cliff of fear and paranoia.

As she sat down to dinner she believed she had regained some semblance of calm. Until a tall slightly stooped man in his early seventies was ushered into the room, and Johanna proudly introduced him as Dr. Eugen Fischer.

Janis wracked her brain – Dr. Eugen Fischer. The name was familiar. Balthazar prayed. Dr. Fischer sat neatly with a bowed head. After grace, when Dr. Fischer addressed her she noticed his German accent immediately. He spoke with a cultured drawl, not unlike Balthazar. Were they related? Judging by Johanna's response he was not a first time visitor to the farm. Conversation was light and Janis was almost lulled into a relaxed state when the doctor dropped his first bombshell. It was after Balthazar enquired about the length of his trip. While Dr. Fischer didn't clarify where he'd actually come from he segued into an anecdote about rough seas on a ship. And then; 'I remember

when we shipped almost three thousand skulls we collected at Shark Island. They took ages to get back to Germany. Luckily travelling has become much easier.'

A door swung open inside Janis. She felt as if she'd been living in a dream, taking everything she'd witnessed at face value. Suddenly a murky whispering mist streamed around her urging her entry into a room full of danger. Memories roiled inside her, of waiting in the breathless dark, listening to her father's snoring and then imperceptibly, James's weeping. She turned to the doctor.

'Where is Shark Island?'

'It's a small Island off the coast of South-West Africa.'

'How did it come by its astonishing name? '

He shrugged. 'I have no idea, my dear. I was merely there to perform experiments.'

Balthazar's face stiffened into a wide smile as Johanna leaned forward, soft and eager.

'Dr. Fischer does important work with …'

'That's enough, thank you Johanna.' Interrupted Balthazar.

Nothing had changed in that room, the light was still spilling over the damask tablecloth, their wine glasses were still full, their cutlery neatly closed on their smeared dinner plates, but everything had changed irrevocably. Balthazar stared grimly at his daughter, who looked afraid. Janis felt fear crawl down the back of her neck like a single trickle of sweat. Dr. Fischer stared at her, she felt lacerated by his objectivity.

Balthazar stood up and escorted the doctor out of the room. Johanna burst into tears. Janis rubbed her back and tried to soothe her. It was important that she utilized the girl's vulnerability, as well as not arousing any suspicion. She led her out of the dining room and into her bedroom. She closed the door and drew the curtains and sat next to Johanna on her bed. Johanna had calmed down and blew her nose.

'I'm sure your father won't be angry with you for long, Johanna.'

'I don't understand it. The doctor has come before and we have always spoken openly.'

Janis took a steadying breath. 'I am a stranger, and English.'

Johanna shook her head. 'After all you've done, after all I've done...'

So this was it, the root cause of Johanna's upset.

'Sometimes Fathers can be impatient. Besides, I'm sure Dr. Fischer didn't notice.'

Johanna shook her head. 'No, he wouldn't. He's a very clever man.'

Janis nodded. ‘That much is obvious. Is he a medical doctor?’

Johanna nodded. ‘He worked in South-West Africa, doing tests on the people there. They were put on Shark Island.’

‘Which people?’

Johanna shrugged. ‘Hottentots, I think he called them. My father has postcards.’

‘Could you show them to me?’

Johanna pulled back at the request. She began to shake her head. Janis leapt in to do damage control.

‘You don’t have to do anything you don’t want to. Please. Perhaps it’s time I said goodnight.’

As she walked towards the door, she was taken aback to feel Johanna’s arms around her waist, her face in her neck.

‘Thank you.’ Johanna whispered.

Chapter 18

February 1943

Johanna wept as Balthazar stood before her, grim and tense.

'I am busy with men's work, with God's work. I have no time for your foolishness.'

Johanna approached her father, she put her arms around him, but he did not respond. He stepped away, he held her arms down, and gripped them tightly.

'Dr. Fischer is an important man, a visionary who will help us with our cause. You have jeopardised months of planning.'

'But I didn't mean to, Papa. I do everything you say, everything. My life is devoted to yours.'

'But clearly not enough, Johanna. What do you know of Mrs. Morgan? Nothing. Why are you doing this? Looking for people outside yourself, outside ourselves.'

Grief overtook Johanna. It had been so long since she'd felt that visceral emotion that it took her by surprise. You go to meetings by yourself, and I am on the outside, looking in. You sit with men, you ride and hunt with them, you are a leader among men. When you are with them you are open, your head thrown back and you shine like gold. When you are with me you are bored, you talk about food and bedding and servants. You issue instructions, you do not ask for my advice. You do not toss out your legs before you,

slump and hang your arms on either side of the chair and laugh from your belly. These are the words that pushed up in her throat and came out as sobbing.

Balthazar struggled when she cried, she knew this.

'Do you miss Piet?'

Johanna nodded, a lie, a small enough one.

'Piet turned out to be a rotten apple, my dear. There will be other men.'

'I don't want other men, Papa, I just want to be with you.'

'You will always be with me, Liefling, always.'

'When next you go hunting, can I come too?'

Balthazar laughed. And shook his head.

'When the commando's come, Papa, for training, I want you to train me too.'

'Johanna, you are a woman, you are a gatekeeper of our hearths, the mother of our hearts and the bearer of all our futures. You are too valuable to become a soldier. It is my purpose in life to treasure you, keep you safe, before you belong to another.'

Balthazar cupped her cheek and kissed her on the forehead.

'Behave, Liefling. That's all I ask of you.'

Johanna watched her father walk away from her. God abandoned her in that moment, and only the devil murmured in her heart and sang a lament of loss. Johanna finally knew she would never be good enough for her father. But there was one person for whom she could be good enough. Maybe this is what becoming a woman actually meant. Knowing that you can only trust your own kind. There is more than one type of belonging. There is the Afrikaner collective, there is the brotherhood of men and then there is the sisterhood of women.

***

Janis slept badly. The heat was oppressive. Images of Balthazar's stiff expression, Johanna's upset and Dr. Fischer's courtliness jostled inside her, competing with an image of a large aquatic beast with bloody teeth, her imagining of a shark. Max's grim expression superimposed the sharks. His abrasiveness, his fast changing and complex expressions, never had a face been so mobile and so inscrutable at the same time. Janis woke with a thin skin of sweat making the hairs on her arms flat, and she smelt sour.

After bathing she made her way through the house quietly, her camera in hand. She found Johanna kneading dough in the kitchen. She seemed recovered from the night before. She greeted Janis brightly. Her father had taken the men hunting at dawn, she was making bread in the meantime. Because when the men came back with kudu or

anything else she would have to help with the butchering and preparation of the meat. Janis controlled her overwhelming desire to bring up the postcards that Johanna had mentioned the night before. The arrival of a horse drawn cart bearing the corpses of buck interrupted her.

A few African servants laid the animal on the sandy ground and Balthazar cut the animal's throat in order to release its blood. He then slit the animal from its groin to its throat and proceeded to unfurl the animal's intestines from its still warm inner cave. He tossed them on the ground for the servants, who grabbed them greedily. He chucked the heart and other organs after the intestines. The men hoisted the buck up and hung it on a massive meat hook. Balthazar loosened the skin with a paring knife and then began to peel the skin off with his hands. He worked quickly, and surely, and Janis who'd seen enough animals skinned recognized expertise when she saw it. Her father had never skinned an animal in his life, the servants had always done it. Blood and bits of flesh flecked across his arms, and on his face and neck.

Balthazar seemed to enjoy it. Once the skinning was done and the blood had coalesced in a sticky blackness beneath the gently swinging beast, the animal was taken down, carried away to be butchered in the small outhouse a short distance away, completely covered by small wire mesh. Johanna followed and came back a short while later bearing a huge bowl with massive slabs of meat. Balthazar emerged after her, smeared with blood, flushed and cracked a few jokes with the surrounding servants. It was the most unguarded Janis had ever seen him.

Balthazar announced there was to be a big braai that evening. Johanna seemed to avoid Janis, and after several attempts to engage with her, Janis gave up and went up to her room. She spent a restless day, pacing, trying to control her raging thoughts that swung from absolute fear that Balthazar was somehow on to her, to utter conviction that he wasn't and it was only a matter of time before she found concrete evidence of Radio Zeesen, and how proud Max would be of her on her return.

She longed to feel his intense and knowing watchfulness when he thought she wasn't aware of his gaze. For all his sharpness and wit Max lived almost silently alongside her, like a much more mature man. How did someone so young become so old so quickly? She knew of course it was the suffering he'd endured. She knew too that she was similar. She lay on top of the bed covers, and curled herself around the needle-sharp longing for the man who had become the only tenuous constant in her life. She closed her eyes.

Much later, Johanna came to fetch her, and Janis was relieved to see that the young woman had fallen back into her usual amiability. Fires were lit, and people gathered around them. Near the main fire sat Eugen Fischer. Janis stood still and decided on which was the best way to approach him when Balthazar appeared at her side. His skin gleamed in the flickering firelight, he looked more relaxed than he had done the previous evening. He smiled at her, and once more Janis marveled at the enveloping cordiality she felt radiate from him.

'Do you have everything you need, Janis?'

'Yes, thank you.'

'I hope you'll enjoy the evening, we have entertainment planned.'

He moved off and Janis realized it was the first time he'd used her first name.

The food was delicious, and rich. There were a few men and women who sat around the various fires and quite a few people came to greet her, some of them had been the actors in her photographs. Eugen Fischer, however remained a solitary and wizened

entity skirting Balthazar's encompassing warmth. He was being protected, that much was clear. And through the few glances she and Balthazar exchanged, Janis became aware that he had developed a wariness whenever he looked her way.

Later in the evening when quite a few of the men were clearly drunk, a song began to swell from firstly a small grouping of men and then the women picked up on it and began to harmonise along with them. It was lyrical and moving.

It was much later, when Janis was about to go to bed, that Johanna called her aside and led her into Balthazar's office. It was a room at the far end of the house, with one curved wall. There was a large, oak desk in the centre placed on a deep red Persian mat. A single painting of a baobab tree hung above the desk, painted in charcoal and umber. The bookcase held a collection of books on theology, philosophy, the study of a learned and compassionate man. Johanna quietly scuffled through a bottom drawer of her father's desk. Janis approached a wooden cupboard and opened the door. Her heart began to beat faster as she noticed a radio transmitter at the back of the cupboard.

'Look.'

Janis took the pile of black and white photographs. She slowly went through them, disbelief and then revulsion spreading.

'I wasn't lying.'

Janis stared at the emaciated African corpses of women swinging from a tree.

"I'm not sure what you mean?' She knew her voice sounded hoarse.

'Dr. Fischer, he collected their skulls, and took them back to Germany, for experimenting. They're Hottentot women.'

Janis slid the horrifying image behind the next one. Which was a collection of clearly German soldiers in the 1900's, posing grotesquely with naked, emaciated African women. Johanna smiled briefly at the image.

'That's how I learnt about what men and women do.'

Janis felt sick. The next photograph was a collection of skulls beneath a sign that said, Shark Island.

The photographs detailed image after image of starving African women and children, either on the brink of death or already deceased. When Janis held the final photograph, which was of a collection of severed Hottentot children's heads, badly bruised and battered, she almost retched.

'Eugen did all these experiments on them, the women and the children. This is where he created his racial science theories.'

'Why?'

'It helped him develop the T4 Programme.'

Janis did not know what to say. Johanna began to seem uneasy.

'We need to go, Papa can't find me here.'

They slid out of the study, and Janis made her way up to her bedroom. She said goodnight to Johanna and closed the door quietly behind her. She allowed her nausea to rise. She'd witnessed war first hand, she'd captured death, but she had never seen torture so casually captured, as if the person behind the lens was recording no more than an everyday occurrence.

Janis began to pack her clothes, she'd achieved her mission, she'd found the radio transmitter, and concrete evidence that Balthazar supported the Nazi cause. But the photographs kept recurring in her mind's eye. Johanna had had documents too, information which supported those photographs, which would give her clues as to why they were obviously relevant to Nazi theory and strategy today.

It was after midnight before Janis felt it was safe enough to go back to the study. She took her small torch, and a knife and slipped out of her room. The house was quiet, its small creaks and groans a comfort, a reminder of normality. She went into Balthazar's study and began to search through the drawers that Johanna had opened.

She found the files easily. It took Janis some time to read through neatly typed German that compared the Hottentot severed heads and skulls to German skulls, and how the differences proved that African peoples were animal in nature.

It seemed the German army in the 1900's had used Shark Island as a prisoner camp where the unimaginable had taken place. It appeared as though mass extermination had happened to the Hottentot people of South-West Africa. Dr. Fischer had gone on to document his racial science, claiming that Africans were less than human, the equivalent to animals. It appeared as though he had then experimented on these prisoners in the most gruesome ways.

Further cursory readings of the documents drew references to Jews, Gypsies, and went on to outline how annihilation was necessary for mentally retarded children, and indeed the only humane thing to do. Janis skipped her eye over the pages, and read briefly about the detail of the drugs used, as well as the number of children euthanized. This seemed to have started in 1937.

All this confirmed the reports that were seeping through Europe, dark whispers of unthinkable atrocities happening to the thousands of Jews who'd been rounded up and bundled into trains, destinations unknown. It made her fear for her brother's life, and it made her fear for the future of mankind.

The light suddenly going on gave her a start. She dropped her torch and it clunked loudly as it rolled along the flagstones. Balthazar moved quietly into the room. Janis put the files down slowly.

'Why?'

'Because people who are mentally damaged do not need to live, in fact they shouldn't be allowed to live. Miscegenation is the thief of excellence.'

Janis felt claustrophobic.

'It's a programme which we hope to institute here. For the Africans.'

'You plan to … euthanize Africans? What, the entire race?'

Balthazar nodded. 'Of course. We will keep the strongest ones alive, the old, the infirm and the mentally ill will find peace with this programme. After all the strongest of the South-West African Hottentots built the Luderitz Railway.'

Balthazar was too close to her. She stepped back and he moved forward, he grasped her arm.

'Why are you here?'

'You invited me. Johanna did.'

'You have been manipulating her, putting strange ideas into her head. You have pursued her with zeal. You've been very covert. Only someone with training is that good. I know, I train my own.'

Janis's hand searched for her knife, as she moved quickly towards the door, but he was faster than her, he stepped in front of the door, and closed it swiftly.

'I think it's time I left.'

She tried to get past him, she knew to reveal her knife now would be to openly state her motives. She tried once more to get to the door. She ground her heel into his foot. Balthazar flinched. It was the last thing she remembered.

***

When Janis came round she was on a cement floor in a small, dark room. Her body ached. Her knife was gone. She touched her face, her nose was sore and bruised and she had dried blood stuck to a cut on her upper lip. Fear burrowed into her, like a shivering animal, rapidly making tunnels that snaked all over the place, swelling in width. She knew she would have to fight hard to control it, that she should be fighting it right now. But it expanded and took over her mind and her body. She knew she would die tonight. She knew also that she would die in pain. She would never see Max or her brother again. The concentration of this loss made her collapse inside. She became overwhelmed by it, it poured out of her in hot tears. She cried until her stomach hurt and her cut lip burned. And then she fell asleep.

They came for her the next morning. A muscular African servant collected her. He gripped her and led her out into sweltering light. She realised she'd been kept in the butchering outhouse. She needed to urinate. She told the servant who merely ignored her. He pushed her into a small room, with two chairs and a table. Balthazar sat on one chair, and a few men in uniforms stood directly behind him. They wore Khaki uniforms and sported a badge with a wagon wheel surrounding a wagon, and the words Ossewabrandwag encircling the wheel. She realized they must be Stormjaers, brown shirts, the military wing of the Ossewabrangwag. The very same men that had killed and burnt Piet Nel, and possibly the men behind Dice Lotter's disappearance. She wondered whether she would be next.

'Please, sit down.'

Janis approached the chair with trepidation. She knew it would do her no good to be truculent. She sat down and stared at the table, avoiding eye contact with him. He grabbed her chin to look at her directly none-the-less.

'Who do you work for?'

'No one. I take portraits. My husband's in the army.'

'Yes, your husband, who disappears from time to time.'

They had clearly been watching the flat. 'Well, yes, he's in the Army.'

'And what does he do in the Army?'

'He's a signalman. He fought in North Africa, after he was wounded he was posted in Johannesburg. He's on desk duty now.'

'Where does he go? Back to Cairo?'

'I don't know … maybe.'

Balthazar studied her carefully.

‘Please, could I use the toilet?’

He shook his head, regretfully.

‘Why were you meeting Dice Lotter?’

Fear choked her up, they knew, they knew everything. She had been so stupid.

‘My husband asked me to.’ She lied. ‘He wanted me to give him something.’

She almost said too much, she pulled back just in time.

‘What was it?’

‘Papers. So that he could travel to England.’

Her bladder felt close to bursting.

‘Who gave you the papers?’

'My husband.'

Janis did her best to stick to the cover story. She didn't offer too much, and she didn't offer too little, just enough for them to hopefully believe she was merely the victim of her husband's inefficiencies. Balthazar drilled her, over and over again. Asking her the same questions in minutely differing ways. At some point Janis released her bladder and let the urine run down her legs, drenching her underwear and making her trousers cling to her legs. Balthazar began to treat her with a growing distaste. The soldiers shuffled in the background, murmuring to one another in Afrikaans or Dutch she couldn't tell. It wasn't German, that much she knew.

Eventually the African servant took her back to the butchering house. He supplied her with a glass of water, a hunk of bread and a bucket for which she assumed for toilet use. She almost welcomed being back in the metallic smelling room. Flecks of sun bled through the tiny holes of the mesh doors and windows, highlighting the dust from outside as it poured through. There were dried pools of blood that she could just make out in the daylight. Animals, or humans she couldn't tell.

She ate her bread and then sat down, pulling her damp legs up toward her chin. The fear came back, but this time she tried to control it by focusing on the detail of the room. She eventually settled on a tiny spider on the wall and tracked his intricate journey to the floor. She focused on her breath. She counted her in breaths, her out breaths. They would leave her alone for a good few hours before re-interrogating her. Balthazar knew what he was doing.

She must have slept for a while. Because when they came for her it was dusk. She was taken into the same room, but there was a different man waiting for her, rougher, with a thicker accent than Balthazar's. He too was in a khaki uniform with the

Ossewabrandwag badge. He asked her the same questions as Balthazar had. Except he was aggressive where Balthazar wasn't.

'I don't believe you.'

He slammed his hands on the table directly in front of her causing her to flinch backwards. She'd focused on every question he'd asked her, praying she answered them in exactly the same way she'd answered Balthazar. The fear came again, so swiftly, she began to cry. As she cried there was a small part of her that congratulated herself, she didn't look like any kind of spy wilting at the first bit of violence. He slapped her across the face, hard. Her cheek stung and he gripped her neck, pulling her close to him, so close she could smell the cigarette smoke on his breath.

'Lying bitch. Lying Ingelse bitch. A whore for England, ne?'

'Please, I just want to go home.'

'What do you know of Eugen Fischer?'

'Nothing.'

He held on to her neck and gripped the top of her hair hard and yanked her head back with it.

'Liar.'

'Please …'

'What do you know of Balthazar?'

'I know he's Johanna's father, that's all I know.'

He released her quite suddenly. Relief bolted through her, causing her upper body to semi collapse on the table. She pulled herself back to sitting and looked at the man.

'Why did you ask Johanna to show you those photographs?'

'I'm a photographer. She told me the doctor had done work in … South West Africa, she told me about Hottentot skulls. I was curious.'

'Who is this man?'

The abrupt turn of the conversation took her by surprise. The soldier presented her with a photograph. The man was captured in motion, it appeared as though he was walking across a Johannesburg street. His head dipped low, but not too low to completely obscure his face. It was Poulsen. Janis knew as she closed her eyes, she'd made a fatal mistake. The soldier grabbed her hair again.

'Who is he?'

‘My husband’s boss.’ Stick as close to the truth as possible, always.

‘He’s SOE. You know SOE?’

Janis nodded. Her head began to ache.

‘What is SOE? Tell me?’

‘Special Operatives Executive.’

Her threw her head towards the tabletop, the pain came hard and fast as her forehead connected with it. He grabbed her hair once more, pulling her head back so that he could smack her hard across the face. Her split lip bled once more. Out of the corner of her eye she watched his hand close into a tight fist when it hit her nose, she screamed.

‘Enough.’

Balthazar stood at the door. He nodded to the soldier.

‘I said, enough.’

Chapter 19

February 1943

The soldier stood back as Balthazar entered the room. He handed Janis a small towel with which to mop the blood that ran down her face and into her mouth. She took it, shaking slightly as she applied it to her swelling nose. Balthazar spoke softly to the soldier in Afrikaans. He left and Balthazar sat down in front of her. Janis knew what was happening, she understood that Balthazar was going to be supportive and kind towards her as a foil for his brutal foot soldier. She would have to be twice as vigilant with him as a result. She had already made too many mistakes.

'Your husband, interesting man. When did you get married?'

'Last year.'

'What's his rank?'

'Captain.'

'Where did he serve, which unit?'

'I can't remember, I think it was the Fifty division signals, but I know that he was in North Africa from 1941.'

'Was he recruited by Force 133 then?'

Janis shook her head. 'I don't know.'

'You identified your SOE husband's handler. You would not have known of his existence if you were not somehow involved in all of this.'

Janis shook her head. Her shaking voice and trembling hands were not as a result of any acting, she knew she stood at the edge of life or death. She feared she was leaning more towards death because of her careless slipups. She knew it was of paramount importance that she not allow her panic and fear to take control, otherwise she would never make it through this part of the interrogation. She knew too that this was just the second phase in a very long grinding down process. They wanted to mince her into submission and then kill her, possibly burn her like Piet Nel. The thought made her nauseous with fear.

'Please … my husband tells me nothing of his work. I've met Mr. Poulsen once or twice …'

Balthazar smiled. It felt like a knife sliding through soft flesh to bone.

'When you met him, what did he and your husband talk about?'

Janis shook her head, 'I have no idea, I was cooking dinner. He arrived, they spoke, then he left. That was the only time I saw him.'

‘Did your husband ever mention Piet Nel?’

Janis shrugged. ‘ I can’t remember.’

‘Dice Lotter?’

She would have to be careful. He’d already asked her this question. ‘ Yes, my husband asked me to take him papers, in an envelope.’

‘And what happened?’

‘I met him, I was attacked. I never saw him again.’

It seemed to satisfy Balthazar on some level. Her nose throbbed and her lips burned. Fighting her own fear was exhausting. The constant questioning was challenging all the reserves she had. She didn’t think she’d eaten anything other than the hunk of bread for twenty-four hours. She’d had hardly any water; in a way it was probably better, as she didn’t need to urinate as often.

‘Mr. Maritz, if my husband has offended you, I apologise. Whatever I can help you with … but please, that man …’

Balthazar leant forward as his voice whipped across her. ‘You are a conniving woman.’

'No, please, I've told you all I know. I swear to you…'

His rage unleashed all the panic she'd fought so hard to keep at bay. As the soldier re-entered, Balthazar continued.

'You have exploited the vulnerability of my daughter in an attempt to derail the Ossewa Brandwag. You are a spy and a colluder with the British. You are a shame to your sex and a stain on this land.'

After a signal from Balthazar the soldier smacked Janis so hard that she fell off her chair, and when she attempted to get up he kicked her twice in the stomach. When he pulled her back up she collapsed against him. She'd finally reached the end point. Everything she knew as rational had faded. Her entire universe had disintegrated into a second by second step from fear to pain and then back again. She gave in to it. She closed her eyes and when he let go of her she slid to the floor and lay still. She knew what it felt like to long for oblivion above all else.

Balthazar crouched over her. 'Where is your husband?'

Janis shook her head.

'Where does he meet with Poulsen?'

She shook her head again.

‘Who recruited you? Your husband?’

The questions went on and on and all she could do was shake her head. Until she smelt the cigarette being lit, and then she opened her eyes.

‘Who else have you spoken to apart from Piet Nel?’

The soldier grasped her limp wrist and she felt the cigarette tip against the inside of her upper wrist. The screaming she finally recognized as her own after the burning coal was lifted away from her raw skin. Her vision blurred as she tried to sit upright. The soldier gripped her lower arm again, and was in the process of bringing the cigarette tip down on the very same place it had burnt her before when he suddenly dropped her arm and turned away from her.

She vaguely heard noise and some sort of commotion. She had a sense of someone else entering into the room. She heard another scream and was puzzled when it did not seem to be her own. Johanna with her wide and horrified eyes looked down on her before Balthazar hauled her out of the room. The soldier sat down and cursed. He took a deep pull of the cigarette as he stared at her.

‘You think this is easy for me? I don’t believe in hurting women.’

Janis closed her eyes. She heard Balthazar re-enter the room and issue instructions in rapid Afrikaans. She felt herself being half lifted off the floor. It was the African servant who carried her out into the burning day and deposited her back in the butchering house. She placed her aching face on the concrete floor and swore to herself the next

time they came for her she would tell them everything. She could tolerate the pain and the fear no longer.

A little time later the door opened. Janis didn't bother to open her eyes and it was almost too painful to sit up.

'Janis.'

Gentle hands took her shoulders, and Johanna spoke softly in Afrikaans. Another pair of hands held her arms and they gently moved her up to sitting.

'I'm sorry.'

There were tear marks and dirt streaked across her face. Johanna had clearly been crying for some time. There was a young African girl with her who tried to dab Janis's wounds with an ointment to clean them. But it was too painful.

'You have to get me out of here.'

Her voice was hoarse, her throat ached. The hope she felt terrified her. What if this was another trap? Another way to break her down.

'I'm so sorry.'

‘It’s not your fault, Johanna, you have to calm down and listen to me.’

Janis grasped the young woman’s hands in her filthy ones. ‘Can you help me leave this farm?’

Johanna shook her head. ‘My father locked me in my room. Ansie helped me climb out of the window.’

Janis breathed in. This would be her only chance. She had to capitalise on this or she would die. She breathed out, focusing her attention on her breath. How could she get away from this mess without being caught? She visualized the TME and her training.

‘Please, can you get me clean clothes and a bicycle?’

Tears formed in the young woman’s eyes. Janis gripped her shoulders hard.

‘That man will kill me.’

Ansie said something in Afrikaans and after an unbearable moment Johanna got up, gestured to Ansie and they left the room. Janis was bereft. She staggered to standing and tried as hard as she could to get to the door, but it had been locked. She banged her fist on it, and began to weep.

Then she shouted, which without much effort on her part rose to a hoarse scream. Her body was a vessel of pain. Somewhere deep inside a voice began to soothe her, to calm

her down. That voice warned her to preserve her energy, and be still. Spent, she sat down on the floor. In the dim light she could make out her little spider. He'd crawled to the ceiling and was lowering himself down on a web filament. He was still alive. It made her tear up again and she wiped her eyes roughly. She wanted to kill it, wanted to grind it between two fingers until it was nothing more than a fleck of dust. She reached for it, and then dropped her arm. This was the beginning of spinning out of control. She dipped her head low and closed her eyes, breathed deeply. When she got out of here the last thing she would ever do again would be to breathe deeply. Her relationship with deep breaths had become too intense. She began to laugh.

She tilted her head back against the wall. Then she saw something glint in the gloom, some small shadowy object in the corner of the room. She made her way carefully toward it. It was a bayonet of sorts, possibly a Mauser 98. The various types and sizes had all run into one amorphous mass in her head. There was an engraving on the thin, sharp blade. She ran her fingers over it. *Blut und Ehre!* Blood and honour. The swastika had been carved into the handle, small, almost easy to miss. A vicious joy swept through her. She no longer had to kill her spider, she could find a way out of here. Johanna had helped her after all.

She thought quickly about her options. She needed to get the African servant and guard to open the door. Then she needed to immobilize the guard and find a way to get off the farm. Instantaneously despair took root. She was so weak. She was in so much pain she could never overcome a man of that stature, and she had never been strong to begin with. She stood still. She needed to regain some strength, failing that, agility. Otherwise she really did not have any hope. She moved around the room, stretching her limbs as much as she could. It was immensely painful, clearly the kicks in her stomach had broken some ribs.

After a few laps around the small room, she decided it was now or never. She listened and in the distance she could hear men singing. It was eerily harmonious, clearly

German. She rapped on the door three times, and then waited. The guard didn't respond and so did it again. Still no response. She waited. Then she rapped three times in quick succession again and again until he finally opened the door. She stepped into the middle of the room forcing him to actually enter.

'I need the toilet,' she told him. She gestured that she needed to defecate. He looked momentarily confused. She moved swiftly up to him, using all her body weight and trying to ignore the pain, she stabbed his right shin. Then she bore down all her weight onto his foot. She had the benefit of wearing shoes while he was barefoot. He yelped. She could possibly have broken a small bone or two. He staggered backwards and then Janis plunged the knife as hard as she could up behind his ribs. He collapsed. She headed for the door, hurriedly locked it behind her and then slipped out into the pale dusk.

Momentarily disconcerted by not knowing where she was Janis hunkered down next to a building to gather her galloping thoughts. She recognized the slaughterhouse where she'd been imprisoned not too far away from the outhouse she'd been consistently interrogated in. Both buildings stood out of sight of the main house and its back porch. To the left was the field. There was a narrow path that led into the field and in the far distance she could make out the fence that marked the farm boundary.

The building she was crouched next to appeared to be a farm equipment building of sorts and she could see a tractor. She slipped inside. She could not possibly walk back to Johannesburg. Her heart lifted when she saw stables at the back of the building, but it sank just as quickly when she realised they were empty. A horse she knew how to ride. In a moment of madness she eyed the tractor. She'd been on one a long time ago. She was about to climb up on to it when she heard male voices and footsteps approaching.

She hid behind the tractor. She heard another noise mingling with it and at first could not work out what it was. Then she realised, it was the sound of bicycle tyres on dirt.

She peered through a dirty, chipped window and saw a youth on a bicycle. That was exactly what she needed. She watched and waited as he swung his leg over the bike and leant it against the wall. Frustratingly he lit a cigarette and remained close to it while he spoke to two young men in brown shirts. He was in his late teens and the men he spoke to quickly moved off. Janis was bracing herself for the fact that she may just have to attack him too, which was extremely risky because it was outside and in an open space when he moved off towards the wheat field, looked around and then unbuttoned his crotch. She gripped the bayonet.

While the youth enjoyed a leisurely pee, Janis wasted no time. She ran as fast as her broken ribs would allow, grabbed the bicycle, swung on to it and pedalled madly towards the narrow road in the field. She had to pass the youth on her way, so she had the knife ready in order to slash him if he tried to stop her, which he did. He yelped in surprise and lunged for her but she swiped the knife across the palm of his hand. He fell back in pain and she got to the road and with adrenalin coursing through her pedaled for all she was worth.

She heard shouting in the distance and pushed herself to pedal even harder. Everything became a blur of golden wheat stems, pain and fear. She focussed on what was directly ahead of her. She clutched the knife, smeared with the blood of two men and swore to herself in the worst possible language she knew that she would get out of here alive.

The adrenalin was beginning to subside and every movement of the bicycle was excruciating for her, but she got to the boundary fence. She got through the gate with relative ease and then progressed down the wide dirt road. She glanced up at the sky. It wasn't light but not yet dark enough to see the Milky Way. She could barely make out what she thought was the Southern Cross. She wished she could remember which direction each tip pointed towards.

She heard cars, and more shouting. She steered the bicycle off the road into some foliage. She could not be caught, she would die if she was. She waited until the car had thundered past. She steered the bicycle back on to the road, and found a moderately paced rhythm that seemed to cause her the least amount of pain, one foot in front of the other. Her sole purpose became listening to the sounds of the night and travelling gently but incrementally forward.

She saw the car lights returning in the distance and steered the bicycle back off the road. She crouched next to it as the car drove back past them. She held her breath. But the noise of the engine drowned out any other sound. As she heard the car recede back into the distance she felt faint with relief.

Janis cycled until the end of the dirt road and then turned onto a gravel road. She guessed the direction she needed to be travelling in was southwest. She rode until exhaustion and shock overtook her. She slipped off the road and found a semi concealed burrow beneath some shrubbery. She curled up as much as she could. She closed her eyes until the pink morning woke her again.

Janis struggled to get up, sleeping seemed to have stiffened her aching body. She struggled to get back onto the bicycle. But she managed it, and set off down the road. She lost track of how many hours she had travelled when a passing car stopped, and an elderly Afrikaans couple asked if she was all right. It did not take them long before they insisted on bundling her into their car.

***

'Where the fuck is she?'

Lucas eyed him with distaste.

'And don't look at me like that, I bloody well know what you really think, you poor excuse for a servant.'

Max held out his empty whisky glass and Lucas took it with an excruciating patience that could only have been exaggerated.

'Would you like me to pour you another one, Sir?'

Lucas opened the curtain, and the sun shone in. A deliberate comment on the fact that he had been drinking all night. Max could hear the implied criticism as clear as a thousand bloody bells. He should be sober, he knew that, drinking was the worst thing he could do. Lucas clearly knew that too.

'Coffee.' Was all he managed before he leaned over and vomited between his feet.

He slumped back into the chair and decided he'd never hated himself more. Although he did remember behaving badly when Vivienne, the other woman he'd loved, had also disappeared behind enemy lines. He couldn't remember if he'd got drunk then or just slept with someone else. It could have been both, he reminded himself dismally.

When Lucas came back with the coffee, he eyed the vomit and then turned on his heel and left without comment. Max closed his eyes. Christ, he'd have to clean that up himself too. He felt bone tired, he felt as if he'd done nothing other since arriving in Cairo than clean up the effluent of war.

He sipped the coffee. It was strong and sweet. Lucas knew his stuff. He took small sips, otherwise he knew he'd vomit that up too. When his stomach felt a little more settled he staggered into the kitchen to find a mop and bucket. If he cleaned up most of his mess he could hope that Lucas may do the final mop up. He needed to show willing.

When he slumped down on the floor and began to clean up his vomit he wondered why the bloody hell he cared so much what an uneducated servant thought of him. But he knew why. He knew that Janis valued Lucas, and treated the youth far better than she should. It had always made him angry. It proved two things to Max. One, that Janis was an overblown liberal optimist, and two, also rather sensible. It made Lucas sufficiently loyal towards Janis to police her appalling 'husband's' bad habits.

He'd cleaned up the bulk of the detritus and was rinsing the bucket when sobriety began to creep up the back of his head in the form of a pounding headache. His anxiety returned too, accompanied by a wave of nausea. Christ, he hoped she was still alive. He turned his mind adroitly away from the fact that there was a good chance that even if she was still alive she was in bad shape. She had been gone for four days, instead of two.

'Sir, we could look for her.' Lucas had crept back into the kitchen behind him.

Max shook his head. 'I need to be near the telephone. Besides, I don't know where she is.'

Lucas cleared his throat. 'My uncle may know how to get information …'

Max eyed him carefully. He was right after all, Lucas was an eavesdropper, and an extremely good one apparently. ‘Your uncle is a resourceful man.’

Lucas granted him a respectful smile.

‘All right, tell Cyprian to have the car ready in half an hour. I’ll need a bath first.’

‘I’ve already run you one, Sir.’

Wonders would never cease. Max made his way upstairs and sank into a hot, deep bath. He plunged his head beneath the water and opened his eyes. He saw the ceiling, stained with cigarette smoke, ripple through the water. He thought of Janis, hurt and isolated. He thought of Vivienne dead and alone, and closed his eyes. It occurred to Max that if he didn’t come up for air he would never have to think of either woman, or indeed of anyone else again.

He pulled his head above the water soon after that stupid thought had slid through his mind. Suicide was for people who had time on their hands. He soaped himself, and dimly through the emergent noise of a city coming to consciousness, he heard the downstairs telephone began to ring.

Chapter 20

Johannesburg, February 1943

The burn marks on Janis's wrist were being treated when Max arrived. He looked haggard, as if he hadn't slept since she'd left and smelt very strongly of toothpaste and soap. When he came close to her she realised his eyes were bloodshot and his mint-tinted breath was tinged with alcohol.

'Dear God, Janis?'

She asked the nurse to leave them alone. She stared at him.

'I'm glad you're alive, old girl. Truly.'

A ferocity built inside her. 'Have you been drinking?'

'What the bloody hell did you expect me to do?'

'Come looking for me?'

Max folded one thin leg across the other as if he was about to address a lecture group.

'With the directions you carefully jotted down for Lucas to bring back to me?'

His sarcasm cut deep. She stared at the ceiling, conscious of his studying her. She didn't want to make the mistake of coupling her outlandish romantic expectations with the rough truth of the man in front her. She'd already made that mistake once before.

'Janis, you're going to have to tell me what happened out there.'

She took a deep breath and told Max everything she could remember about the location of the farm. She told him about the radio transmitter, Eugen Fischer and the photographs. He said nothing, he merely listened and wrote the occasional note down in his book. As she spoke about the T4 Programme he seemed shocked. He made her go back over the detail of the images of the torture of Hottentot women, in relation to the German 1937 euthanasia project. It appalled her to describe the images. Max pushed her until she recalled everything she could. She was spent as she finally lay back on the pillows and he took her hand.

'Janis.'

'Johanna needs to be rescued, her father will realize she helped me to escape sooner or later.'

'What information did you give them?'

'I had to tell them about Poulsen, they had a photograph. Some information about you … that you were in Signals, when we got married, that's all, I swear.'

The sympathy in his eyes was not what she expected and made her burst into tears. He sat silently while she wept. It felt as if she cried forever. When she finally stopped, she stared at him. He stared back, his gaze never wavering. She could read anything she wanted to in those eyes she realized, love, admiration and rage. It could all be resonant, or it could be nothing more than her longing made manifest in the darkness of his pupils. The one thing she knew for sure that in her grieving for her own mortality, he did not flinch, or turn away. His presence sustained her anguish like an ancient pitcher, full of cracks but still able to hold water.

'I want to come with you.'

'No.'

'I need to show you where the farm is.'

'You've already told me. You need to rest.'

'Where's Cyprian?'

'Outside, and don't even think about it.'

'Broken ribs, a broken nose, and some bruising, that's all, please.'

But Janis felt sick at the prospect of going back to the farm. So when Max shook his head and stroked her filthy hair, relief spread through her. He was right, she would achieve nothing by going back.

***

Two days later, after Balthazar's farm had been raided, Cyprian collected Janis from hospital and took her back to the flat. Max wasn't there, he was probably meeting with Poulsen, she assumed, but Lucas was and had cooked lunch. Janis felt surreal walking back into what struck her immediately as her home. Max's dirty boots lay at the front door waiting to be polished. Hers stood next to his, not nearly as scuffed. Lucas polished them more frequently that he did Max's.

Janis knew that this was merely a flat for covert operations, but it had become representative of who she'd become, the residence of a woman who photographed loneliness and death. She was the lover of an irascible man, who called for his dead wife in his sleep. She now had the dubious title, 'interrogation survivor' to add.

She walked stiffly into her darkroom and sat down. Her camera was still at Balthazar's farm along with the photographs she'd taken of the Boer Concentration Camp re-enactments. She wondered if they'd destroyed it or if there was some way of recovering it. Indiscriminate thoughts filtered through her mind, Max sitting by her hospital bed, his eyes closed, mouth open. Balthazar's contained rage, Johanna's fear, the pain from her wounds. She looked at her burn marks and ran her fingers over them lightly. They were still raw, a thin scab was just beginning to form.

Poulsen had come to the hospital and both he and Max had debriefed her. It was a second interrogation, but this time one without pain or violence. Poulsen barked

questions at her, over and over, the same ones framed in different ways. All designed to ascertain whether she was telling the truth about how much information she'd given the Ossewa Brandwag. The truth was she hadn't told them very much because she didn't actually know an awful lot. Max had done his job well, managed his cell with efficiency, and her task had been very simple and not too challenging; befriend Johanna and find out the extent of her father's Nazi activities.

Eventually, Poulsen gave her the all clear. But Janis would have to leave Johannesburg and not return until after the war. She was to go back to Cairo, where it had all begun. She didn't know if Max would also be going back, or if he would be posted somewhere else. She hadn't asked him either. She didn't want to reveal the extent of how she felt about him. And although he'd been a surprisingly constant presence he'd been reserved, almost formal with her.

As much as she berated herself for being caught, Max assured her she'd more than delivered on her mission. They'd discovered the location of Radio Zeesen, which had been off air since the raid, and they'd also uncovered the extent of the Ossewa Brandwag's alliance with the Nazis. At least a dozen of Balthazar's men had been interned in camps awaiting trial. Balthazar and his daughter were still at large. The Stormjaers had taken a significant blow from this exercise. The images of the severed children's heads stuck in Janis's mind. Slavery in the twentieth century; the very notion of it made her despair.

Janis switched on the bright overhead light in her dark room and stared at her empty and dry developing trays. Max hadn't told her what they'd recovered during the raid. He merely told her by the time they arrived, Balthazar and Johanna had disappeared, and they'd found a Swastika Flag in one of the out buildings. The transmitter was gone, but there was other proof that Zeesen had been operational from that site. He told her that they'd found some of the material she'd told them about, but not all of it. She tapped the

red bulb until it swung imperceptibly above her, like it was fighting the overhead florescence and failing.

It reminded her of a Nakuru winter. How she'd stood above James's bed, but he'd gone. She'd slipped out of the half-open window. Slid along the side of the house like a spirit. She'd heard the familiar sound, a sjambok slicing air. Sobbing too. Except it's not James.

James brought the sjambok down on Pascali's shoulders. She knew she must stop him. But she did nothing. Pascali wept soundlessly. James was breathing heavily. Pascali fell over face down. Blood snaked across his skinny back like centipedes. His small hand stretched out along the dirt as if toward her. As she slipped away she heard James breathe her name. Monster. Come back, I know you're there.

Janis was filled with an overwhelming desire to get her camera back, to develop those re-enactment photographs. Perhaps those people could be identified and found. She summoned Lucas to find out if he knew of Max's whereabouts. He didn't. She told Lucas to get the car ready. Lucas urged Janis that she was not to leave the flat, those were Max's orders. Janis shrugged this off and asked Lucas to tell Max where she was going when he got home. She then went to her bedroom and retrieved her spare Welrod from the safe.

When Janis climbed stiffly into the back of the car Lucas slid into the front seat. He'd left a note for Max. Cyprian locked the doors and then switched on the engine.

'You sure, Madam?'

'Please, drive, Cyprian.'

And he did.

It took them about an hour and a half to reach the farm. It had felt substantially longer when she'd been on the bicycle. As they approached Janis began to feel afraid. Lucas was right, this was a stupid idea. Max would be furious. Poulsen would probably kick her out of the SOE for rank insubordination.

Cyprian pulled up right outside the house and got out so that he could open her door. When she stood up slowly he shook his head. Janis ignored him, felt for her Welrod. Janis, comforted that it was there, pushed the half-open front door of Balthazar's farmhouse and stepped inside.

It was cool as it always was. Furniture had been turned over, and papers blew gently across the flagstone floor. Clearly the entire house had been ransacked, probably first by Balthazar and his men, and then secondly by the SOE. She moved as quietly as she could towards the study. Each and every sound grated against her heightened senses. She stared at the half open study door at the end of the passageway. She almost turned on her heel and left, the fear felt overwhelming. She took one step and then another, and then another. Eventually she made her way inside the room.

The desk was still in the same place, it was probably too heavy to turn over. Books had been ripped off shelves and lay in haphazard piles on the floor. The chair lay on its side. Janis made her way to the drawers, some of which had been ripped out of the desk, some of which were still half open. She made her way slowly through piles of papers. She took her time, and read through them carefully, slowly translating the German. She found little of what Johanna had shown her. Apart from a letter from Eugen Fischer to Balthazar written in German. She knew enough to understand that he was accepting Balthazar's invitation to visit. He also mentioned General Goering. This puzzled Janis;

the reference appeared to be in the 1900's. With a chill she realised that this must refer to Goering's father, who had at some point been the Governor of German South-West Africa. The letter finished off by urging Balthazar to read his two-volume work. Janis eyed the piles of books.

She scrabbled through them. Eventually she found one by Dr. Eugen Fischer entitled *The Rehoboth Bastards and the problem of Miscegenation among Humans*. She flicked through the book. He mentioned his previous tome in the acknowledgements, *The Outline of Human Heredity and Racial Hygiene.* She read further and garnered snippets of words and phrases. They created a terrible hypothesis that made the Hottentot corpses swing back into her mind like a ghastly recurring joke. She went back to the letter. It referred to something called Aktion T4. She knew this to be the sterilization and euthanasia programme Balthazar had spoken about.

She heard the footsteps before the door swung open. She gripped her Welrod and pulled the magazine down to ready the weapon. Johanna stood in the doorway, filthy and disheveled, with Lucas close on her heels.

'It's okay, Lucas.'

Janis approached Johanna, who shook and began to weep.

'I came back for you.'

Johanna began to shake her head in an almost robotic way.

‘No. He will never allow it.’

‘It’s not up to him, is it? You can make your own decisions. Just like you did the night you helped me.’

Johanna continued to shake her head.

‘Johanna, I can protect you.’

Janis realised how thin this promise sounded given that the last time Johanna had seen her she’d been on her hands and knees in pain.

‘He’s coming.’

Cold dread crept through Janis as she approached Johanna.

‘Come with us.’

Johanna took an incremental step forward. Janis took her hand and led her back through the house and out into the sunlight. Cyprian shouted a warning to her and Janis, when she turned around saw why.

Balthazar approached from the wheat field. His clothes were grimy but his shirt remained tucked into his trousers. His shoes were scuffed and the bottom of his pants

had dried mud on them. He had some dirt on the side of his face and his hair was lank. He held a pistol in his hand that was pointed straight at Janis.

'Johanna, kom hier.'

He beckoned his daughter to come to him. Johanna stood still. Janis could feel the pulse at the base of her throat begin to thud.

'Please put that gun down.' She said with a lot more steadiness than she felt.

He merely ignored her. 'You think you're so smart and cultured with your English ways? You don't know a damn thing about my daughter.'

'She needs to live a normal life. Not one force fed on hatred and lies.'

'Cleanliness is next to Godliness. That is the meaning of my culture. That is everything your culture decimates. The only hatred I have ever seen is you and your kind when you imprisoned us like animals and watched us starve to death.'

Janis brandished Eugen Fischer's book. 'Then how can you sanction this? This is murder, it's more than that, this is a whole-scale destruction.'

Balthazar looked momentarily confused. 'The doctor states his research on Shark Island proved that Negro blood is of lesser value. So mixing it with our blood will destroy European culture.'

Lucas made a strange choking sound. Janis bizarrely wondered whether it was laughter.

'He advises nothing your people haven't already done, Janis. Africans should be exploited by Europeans as long they are useful, after which they must be eliminated.'

'Like the Jews?'

'Like all lesser species.'

Johanna was ashen and remarkably silent.

'She doesn't want to go with you, Balthazar, 'said Janis as coolly as she could. 'She wants to come with me.'

'Is this true?' Balthazar only had eyes for his daughter.

A tear snaked down Johanna's cheek. She remained quiet.

'You spat on your mother's spirit the day you helped this woman.' He gestured towards Janis. 'The grace and beauty she bestowed on you withered and died. God will forsake you as will I.'

Johanna began to weep in earnest. Balthazar held out his gun free arm towards her.

‘It is not too late to resume your place within our hearth.’

Johanna looked at Janis, with all the confusion of her heart in her eyes. Janis wished she could promise the young woman that what she longed for she would receive, the freedom to pursue her own dreams, and the right to make her own choices. The truth was Janis didn’t know if any of that would fly after the war. Just now Janis was freer than she’d ever been, more alive than she’d ever imagined. But there are no guarantees in life. Janis knew there was nothing more she could do. Johanna needed to make up her own mind. What was imperative was that they all get out of here alive.

‘I will help you, Johanna. But this is your life and your decision.’

Johanna absorbed what Janis had said. Then she took one step towards her father.

Janis felt him move toward Johanna a split second before she visually registered the action. By the time she had, Lucas had already grabbed the young woman by the neck and put a knife to it. Balthazar lifted his weapon, and cocked the lock mechanism back.

‘Lucas, please step away from her.’ Janis was certain that he would listen to her.

But he merely shuffled Johanna slowly towards her father, presenting her in front of him, as an ephemeral shield.

‘Put the gun down.’ Said Lucas.

'No Untermensch tells me what to do. Even with my own offspring.'

Lucas stopped moving. Still holding the knife against her throat, he placed his mouth against it and kissed her neck tenderly. She was at first too stunned to react and then began to struggle. But Lucas continued to drop light kisses against her neck working up towards her jaw. Then he grabbed at her dress, and ripped it from top to bottom so that she was entirely exposed. Her skin was blisteringly white against her dirty underclothes and the arm of his black skin.

Lucas pulled the dress off Johanna. Janis felt like her world was being torn up as she saw Balthazar's eyes glaze over. Lucas was going to get them all killed. Lucas ran his hand down the side of Johanna's body. It was a gentle caress, like that of a practiced lover. It seemed to all intents and purposes as if he'd done this countless times before. He ran his hand back up to the underside of her breast. Johanna stood still, breathing shallowly.

Cyprian's shouting faded into the chirruping of the cheerful cicadas, Lucas's acute expression of understanding was the second last thing Janis saw before Balthazar's finger pull the trigger back. The shot was deafening. Cyprian began to shout, and as Lucas's body slumped against Johanna's. She stumbled away from him and he collapsed. Then, Johanna fell on her knees beside Lucas. Janis moved swiftly toward Balthazar and aimed her Welrod at him. He stared at his daughter's body hunched in the dust. Janis told Cyprian to tie the man up. Balthazar lurched towards her but she pulled the trigger. The bullet tore through his upper arm. He screamed and staggered backwards.

Cyprian grabbed him and tied him up. Cyprian forced the man into the boot of the motorcar. He slammed the hood down before he could climb out. He continued to shout

but his calls were muffled, Janis only hoped he didn't suffocate before they got back to Johannesburg.

Lucas was still alive as Janis squatted over him. Janis put her hand over his chest. The bullet wound had entered through his upper back. Lucas's blood spewed from his body and stained the dust beneath him. Janis tried to slip her hand beneath his back but couldn't stem the flow. She watched as the life faded from his eyes. She felt immeasurable sadness at her own lack of shock. She turned to Johanna, pale and bleeding too. Cyprian approached his nephew's still warm body and began to weep openly. Janis steered him towards the car.

'We'll come back for him, I swear. But we need to get back to Johannesburg.'

They drove in silence all the way back to Poulsen's office. Johanna continued to bleed and if she was in pain he didn't express any of it. When she finally knocked on Poulsen's door and Max admitted her, shock had begun to lessen and an inexplicable rage began to thicken her voice and make her shake.

Max with two other men went downstairs to retrieve Balthazar from the boot of the motorcar. Poulsen eyed her palely. If he sensed her chaotic emotional state he did not reveal it. 'Miss Morgan, intrepid is certainly the word. Foolhardy and disobedient are others.'

'I'm sorry, sir.'

'Disobeying a direct order results in immediate dismissal. I'm sure you know that.'

‘That’s your prerogative, sir.’ Her jaw began to ache from trying to control herself.

‘I’ll confer with Max, and then make my decision. Not that I owe him or you that courteousy.’

When a tied up Balthazar, with one of his own socks in his mouth, was finally dragged into his office she could have sworn that Poulsen looked at her with glee.

Max took Janis’s arm. ‘I’m taking you home.’

‘You need to lead the interrogation.’ Said Poulsen. Max gestured for the men to take Balthazar into the next room. He turned back to Poulsen.

‘I’ll take her home first.’

‘She still has a driver I presume?’

Max intervened. ‘Balthazar Maritz needs to be left for a while. I won’t be long.’

Poulsen sighed and headed towards his peeling whisky cabinet. Max was about to lead Janis down the stairs, but she walked ahead of him, she wanted to go home, get into a hot bath and never leave it again.

Chapter 21

February 1943

Max was ashen with rage. Janis had never seen him so angry. He tore strips off Cyprian.

'You were meant to protect Mrs Morgan. Protect, not almost murder …'

'Max, for God's sake …' Max turned on her. 'You ignored a direct order by going back to that bloody farm, and you know it.'

'I'm sorry.'

'Sorry's not bloody good enough. You're meant to be a professional. Not some fucking amateur …'

They both stood still as they heard the door close. Cyprian had left. Janis knew he would be going back to collect his nephew's body. She felt overwhelmed with guilt.

'Christ, Max, what more do you want me to say? I got Balthazar.'

Janis went to the bathroom and ran a bath. She locked the door and climbed into the tepid water. She soaped herself until the white suds became rust coloured. Lucas's

blood came off her body, and stained the water a dirty brown. What had he been thinking? His arm across Johanna's body was like an open gash across Balthazar's soul. Janis shivered. Hapless Johanna, destroyed by a caress. It had allowed her to capture Balthazar. It was what had killed Lucas. Now she would never know why he'd done it. Johanna had been taken to hospital. She would try and go and visit her.

She climbed stiffly out of the bath, and let the water run out. She half dried herself and then slept.

When she woke up it was dusk. Max sat on the edge of the bed, back from his interrogation. He held her close. He said nothing and nor did she. What was there to say? Janis felt empty of all speech, all desire and hope. Lucas's incomprehensible act felt too big for her to hold. It somehow ripped all remaining sense from her carefully constructed world. She felt weightless, floating through a narrow corridor held secure by an opaque membrane. If she pressed her face very close against it she could see the detail of Lucas's slumped body and sightless eyes just on the other side. Indeed, all the dead bodies she had known.

All she needed was to step away from that veil of pain, and turn her head. All she needed to do was keep floating down that corridor, and everything would be all right. But Janis realized that her camera was a lens through the sheath. It was an eyepiece into a maelstrom of violence and death. Max was the agent selling access through the tunnel. He lay next to her awake, breathing quietly, his arm heavy across her waist. Not even the weight of his arm felt like it could anchor her to the earth in any way that was concrete.

In that dusky stillness Janis felt an immense and irreversible distance from everything. Janis realised she had loosened herself from everything she had called, 'her life'. That

she had already done so in Cairo at the start of her time there. Subsequent to that she had slunk away from Max, from the earth, the searing sky.

Learning to be a spy had facilitated and developed her ability to dissolve into any construct she could invent. She already had the tools to perfect that, simply by sharpening or slackening the focus of her lenses. She could remake her life, through how she captured it. She could and she would. It was the only shifting reality she could feasibly determine as truthful, because it was hers. Finally she slept. When she woke the next morning Max was frying eggs.

Chapter 22

Johanna lay in a white room and her eyes travelled across the white walls, the slightly yellowed metal cupboard and the white but aging floors. She lifted her hand and dropped it against the white blanket. She could smell the starch that stiffened the white sheets. She could feel her blood pumping through her, methodically, like an executioners gait. It echoed her father's lament. Lost, lost, lost. The nurses tried to feed her but she turned her face away from the thin porridge. She did not need sustenance. She did not deserve it. She had turned away from Papa in his most painful hour, and went to find Janis. Who had given Johanna over to the black man. She slept.

A few hours later, Johann woke up. The window framed the sun bleeding through the billowing grey cloud. The cloud shifted gently. She listened to the silence, and thought of her father. She heard no answer. When she is alone she always felt her father's love, like a monumental mountain, present but not active, visible. Now, when she thinks of him she feels no cradle, all she can feel is emptiness.

She finds the knife she took from his study. It is carefully hidden in her locker beneath her newly laundered clothes. When she's well enough she will leave here and join her father – they tell her. He is in an internment camp. She knows what that means. It means suffering at the hands of murderers. She slips out of her bed and reaches for the knife. Its blade is thin, and graceful. Like he was, is.

she gets back into bed and slowly she turns over on to its point, which slides into the soft flesh below her sternum. The hot gush of blood spreads across the bed. It is no longer white. Purity is hard to achieve and even harder to maintain. God and the devil both know that. She can never be pure again. She hears a distant buzzing, like the drone of an airplane. She has never flown in one and knows it must feel like travelling to the

stars. Perhaps she's travelling to the stars now, perhaps the encroaching dark against her eyes is the night of space before the earth turns towards the sun. Or perhaps there is only dark. Perhaps.

***

Janis never knew what Balthazar admitted to during Max's interrogation. What she did find out in between Max's guarded and oblique references was that he had been defiantly pro Hitler and all his theories. That he had cursed his daughter and her degenerate behaviour. He had been charged with murder and was awaiting trial. Other members of the Ossewa Brandwag were safely interned in a camp.

Max stood close to her as he told her that Johanna had committed suicide. Janis felt bereft. One more life she couldn't save, one more life she'd destroyed. Lucas and Johanna. The ghosts of her future, she knew. She had a sense they would travel with her like thin whispers, the unresolved phantoms of hatred.

Max flew along with her back to Cairo. It was a shadow of its former glamorous self. The Gezira Club that had once exclaimed elegance now seemed a tired structure with unkempt lawns and cocktails missing from its menu. Janis didn't mind, she had got used to the limited choices of food and drink in Johannesburg. She found a cheap hotel on Zamalek and did not invite Max to share a room, even though he had hinted at it.

'I'm flying back to Scotland for a while,' Max told her over dinner. 'Come with me.'

Janis smiled.

'What the hell are you going to do when all this over, Janis?'

He seemed angry at the thought of her possibly not wanting to accompany him. She shrugged.

'Take photographs.'

'There won't always be a war on.'

'There's always a war on somewhere in the world.'

'They'll get your brother out, you know. Poulsen told me.'

She felt full of a sudden and urgent happiness. 'You're sure?'

'I'm sure. Poulsen wouldn't promise if he couldn't deliver.'

Janis sensed Max had fought hard to get her brother out. She felt acutely grateful to Max for he clearly sae this as something decent to do for her. She couldn't wait to see James, look after him and make things right. She didn't know whether she ever would. But she would die trying.

Janis went with Max to the airport. She held him tight. She breathed him into the very essence of her, his intelligence, his arrogance, the hidden but acute sensitivity. 'Last chance?' Max murmured into her ear, 'You'll love the highlands. It's like Africa – except colder.'

She pressed her face into his shoulder. She wanted to say yes. She longed to more than anything. Of all the men she'd ever met he was probably the only one who would tolerate her need for solitude. She pulled away from him. The airport swam behind the hot smear of her tears. She thought she saw one in his eye before he smiled and walked away. She watched him lope through dirty sliding doors into the late Cairo afternoon. His long legs carried him out of the building and then he seemed to disintegrate into the brightness, his frame a receding shimmer on the tarmac. He did turn back, but his face was a wash of whiteness. He raised his hand in a languid salute, and then slipped behind the plane. It was the last time she ever saw him.

Part 4

Sacred State

Chapter 23

October 1969

Max walked hard and fast across the field, his wellington boots sliding through sheep dung and mud. From the top of the hill he could see the Atlantic raging against the silvery rocks. He shivered, feeling the onset of winter like a curse upon him. The bales of hay had all been gathered and wrapped in plastic and stored. The sky was still turquoise, and low. The sun would be setting soon, in the late afternoon. When he got home Elaine would have a raging fire waiting for him. She was a good woman, stable, strong and loyal. He didn't deserve her.

When he left the Island to go and sell wool on the mainland markets he would go to the pub and search for Janis. Of course it was fruitless, he knew he would never see her again. In a moment of weakness he'd taken a woman who looked like her up to his hotel room. To his shame he'd had to ask her to leave. She was a poor replacement to Janis. They always were. For this was not his first encounter, and nor would it be his last. He felt doomed to forever search for those momentary and deeply intense encounters where he inserted himself into someone else's beating heart, and skated along their veins. Like entering another country with its own rules of engagement. Janis was a country he ached to explore and settle.

Max sat down on damp ground. He loved this Island, he would sip a whisky later in front of the fire and watch the telly. He'd turned into his father. He'd wanted to turn into his father, the old man had had a good life and left him this farm. It was a testament to Elaine's courage that she'd agreed to leave Edinburgh and join him here. He knew she was lonely, but he hid behind his taciturnity, it was easier than opening up to her. Sometimes she woke him up in the night, wet with sweat and the residue of grief. All those bloody people he'd killed, or had been responsible for who were dead.

'You never talk about the war?'

What was there to say? He lay down on the ground, and watched the clouds swirl in the tranquil sky. Somewhere on this earth was a place where nothing moved, or changed, where the world stood still in absolute silence. For now, this place would do. He closed his eyes and the memory of taking a woman on a kitchen table slid through him, like fingers stroking him into bliss.

***

December 1969

In the town of Grahamstown, Janis set up her camera on its tripod before taking a few preliminary photographs. The African women stood patiently beneath the *Non-Whites Only* sign. Janis wanted to capture the sense of waiting. As if they were not only queuing to get into the shop to buy their flour and oil and maize meal but also waiting for the time the sign would collapse and smash. Janis captured a series of portraits of the same kind of stoicism beneath non-white signs.

As she drove back to her hotel room, she heard a man singing. It was coming from the Dutch Reformed Church. Dark clouds had begun to collect in a once brilliantly blue sky. The tall, angular but pretty white church perched at the end of the road. It towered over a small square of ramshackle houses. The wind swept up, and thunder signalled a storm preparing to dampen the burning heat. The black children ran and their indistinct shouts echoed in the Sunday silence. Their small fists banged against heavy oak doors. Janis ran through them, towards the large doors and slipped inside.

A man sang accompanied by an organ. A glorious baritone which lead the hymn towards crescendo. A singing Balthazar, in a suit stood with his arms extended as his voice rose. His face was lined now, but his mane of hair was still thick and bronze. When he caught sight of her he faltered. The organist stopped playing. Then he smiled. 'Kan ek jou help, Juffrou?'

Had he recognized her? It was difficult to tell. She shook her head and backed out of the door. She crossed the road and from beneath the cover of the vegetable market tarpaulin, looked back at the church. Janis could see the light cutting through the small diamond paned glass windows. As the children ran she imagined the light slanting over the heavy pews creating haloes on all those who are lucky enough to sit inside. These

children were not. They ran the entire circumference of the church through the circular arrangement of iceberg roses, the mauve agapanthus and orange day lilies, both stiffly upright.

A piet-my-vrou began a plaintive call as thunder lurched closer. As the first fat drops of rain tumbled from heavy cloud, the children ran faster, laughed louder, shouting and singing, skidding on slimy stones. Through the small graveyard they dodged through Piet Coetzee's memorial doves and Linda Van Den Heever's overgrown marble slab.

As the rain slammed down on the rough sandy earth, harder and harder they squealed, tumbling into one another until finally they found cover under a derelict porch roof. The rain deafened their high-pitched laughter as it slammed down on tin.

The grey slate roof was slick and the fading white walls glistened. As the children moved and shifted so did the church and its garden. Everything appeared fluid, the church and the children circling it, like a blurred image. Balthazar lurched through the doors, shouting at them to shut up, while they stood outside the house of God, rain darkening his grey suit turning it to slate.

The children ignored him and carried on running and laughing. Janis hauled out her camera, slipped off the lens cap and trained it on Balthazar. Mouth agape, his body arched with rage, pursuing skipping children whose laughter spilled towards the lens with a luminescent rapture. Janis's finger pressed down on the button.

END