

CHAPTER 1

London, 1945

Phyllis Bowden picked her way carefully across the debris-strewn street. Walking wasn't for the faint of heart this morning, any morning really, and she knew it. Rain had been falling steadily for the past hour and puddles formed in the oddest places. She had traveled this way every day for nearly eight months and the sight of broken store mannequins laying on the sidewalk and street made her breakfast threaten to come up.

She stepped over a plastic arm dislocated at the elbow and a half-clothed torso next to it. Her black leather boot stepped gingerly between a soggy pile of ruined clothing, and a hairless head with frozen eyes staring back at her. Shifting slightly, Phyllis moved to a small, empty space on the wet sidewalk and accidentally dropped her purse by the smooth pink back of a mannequin no longer part of a once chic display. She picked up the purse, brushed off the dirt and debris it had collected, and continued her winding route to the corner. It was a gauntlet actually as shiny plastic legs, severed heads and naked bodies lay in the shadow of the bombed clothing store.

Walking another street to the American Embassy was not much better than this one. She'd tried a few different routes when she first arrived, but it didn't seem to matter; London was still experiencing the odd buzz bomb and more stores and restaurants had been hit in the West End than not. Oxford and Regent Streets had been hit hard during the Blitz with its after effects still evident. Selfridges and Bourne & Hollingsworth remained standing, but the John Lewis store had been gutted one night after a catastrophic fire caused by several incendiary and high explosive German bombs had dropped with pinpoint accuracy. Burning debris caused the famous area to be closed off in an attempt to bring the fires under control.

Fires were not as common these days, but the devastating effects of German bombing Phyllis saw on a daily basis was a constant reminder that, although the war was winding down, the historic city lay in ruins. She was filled with pride for the Londoners who somehow were able to pick themselves up and continue on in spite of all that had happened to them during this war. A war that clung like smoke on her clothes. No matter how many times she washed her blouses, skirts and dresses, the smell of war remained. It was in her mind when she woke up in the morning and in her sight as she picked her unsteady way across the cluttered sidewalk by the ruined store.

Relieved, Phyllis made it to the corner and turned to glance back at the destroyed mannequins in her wake. Her whole body shuddered with the thought they could have been human bodies. She straightened, tucked escaping tendrils of dark curly hair, slightly damp now, under her hat and proceeded to the American Embassy. There was much work waiting for her and she needed to get on with it. That's what everyone was trying to do

these days—just get on with it. Get busy living or get busy dying and heaven knows there had been enough dying.

Phyllis walked up to the Embassy door, smoothed her rain-splattered trench coat and opened the steel fortified door to walk in proudly. Her welcome was unexpected, to say the least.

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CHAPTER 2

What in the world? People scurried up and down the immense hallway as if they weren't sure where they were going. Rats caught in a maze never had the worried expressions Phyllis saw now. Inside guards with stiff uniforms tried to direct frightened men and women to various offices to move them out of the fray. Even from her stunned position at the door, she could see the flinches when guards came into contact with nervous shoulders, quivering backs. No one wanted contact.

She glanced up to the second floor to see much of the same—slamming doors, a blur of humanity trying to find some place to hide. From what?

And then she saw it...something she never, ever dreamed she would see since she had started working for the War Department as a civilian several years ago. Coming down the long staircase was a two-man Military Police escort on either side of the American Embassy's Military Attache, Lt. Col. Ronald Lawrence—Ronnie they called him—being escorted in handcuffs! out the side door, probably to a waiting car.

To go where? And why?

It was a still life picture before her at this moment in time. Everyone had stopped to stare at the tall man with the reddening face as he tried to maintain a confident posture under duress. He didn't fight the shiny handcuffs that kept his arms locked behind him. He merely smiled to one and all, perhaps hoping they wouldn't be as terrified as he had to be.

Ronnie? Being arrested? It was unthinkable that the man she knew, her boss' boss, could have committed such a serious offense to be arrested in the American Embassy before all the men and women he worked with on a daily basis. Ronnie had been at the Embassy only two years and she had found him to be a pleasant, congenial boss, stern when needed, but never a taskmaster. He commanded with more of a velvet glove and had the respect of everyone she knew.

The Military Police officers, in their crisp blue wool uniforms, took a subdued Lt. Col. Lawrence out a side door closing it firmly behind them. The second the door clicked shut, bedlam broke out again with Embassy staff scurrying around like scared mice. Small groups cluttered in corners, no doubt gossiping about what they had just witnessed. Looking past the staircase, Lorraine Watkins caught her eye pointing toward a small office down the next hallway. Phyllis hurried after her and caught her trench coat in the door when she tried to shut it too quickly. Jerking on the material, she nearly tore part of the slick lining.

“What's going on, Lorraine? I just walked in the door and...”

“Where have you been, Phyl? You're late this morning.”

“Well, you know how hard it is to walk past The Emporium. Those mannequins are still all over the...”

“Phyllis.” Lorraine grabbed her arm to tow her to the nearest chair. She shoved her into it. “Sit and listen to me.”

“All right, all right.” Phyllis began to unbutton her coat. “Could I at least take my coat off?”

Lorraine shrugged. Phyllis watched her friend glance in a small mirror by the desk to pat her long pageboy hairdo with an upswept front curl. When she freshened her red lipstick, Phyllis laughed.

“So you rushed me in here to make sure you look good?”

“Hardly.” Lorraine’s worried eyes met hers. “You won’t want to hear this.”

“Then don’t tell me.”

She took a deep breath. “Lt. Col. Lawrence, our Ronnie, was arrested for espionage.”

Phyllis blinked, utterly astonished at the news. “That can’t be.”

Lorraine nodded. “It is and now your boss, Dickie, is in.”

That took a minute to sink in. Major Richard Simpson—Dickie they called him—was the new Military Attache? Phyllis had worked for the man for the eight months she had been assigned to the American Embassy, but had never warmed to him. He seemed like a good sort of man but she was never sure of her footing. He was mad one minute, then obsequious the next. Hot and cold, black and white, nervous and confident...she could never get a bead on what made him tick. She’d finally given up and was ready to ask for a transfer since whatever she did was never quite good enough. And now this.

“Dickie is the new Military Attache? I can’t believe the President would want him in the job. He’s too inexperienced, for one thing. Why not just appoint someone else like they did when Ronnie took the job from Col. Bradley?”

“I haven’t the foggiest, but the word is you’re going to be in the hot seat now.”

“Why? What do you mean?”

“Didn’t Dickie work closely with Lawrence?”

“Not that closely. Dickie doesn’t confide in me, but every time they had a meeting, neither one looked happy coming out of it.”

That stopped Lorraine for a moment. She bit her lip. “Maybe they didn’t get much in the way of happy news.”

Phyllis chuckled. “Astute comment, Lorraine. This is wartime. Besides,” she slid her arms out of the trench coat, “Amy would have mentioned if there had been some kind of fight. She’s been good that way.”

Lorraine sat down on the chair behind her desk, picked up a file, glanced at it and threw in a pile by her typewriter. “Didn’t know you and Amy were such good buddies.”

“Don’t pout,” Phyllis kidded. She stood, headed for the door. “You’re still my best friend, okay?”

“Well, okay.” A slow smile spread across Lorraine’s pretty face. “We still on for tonight?”

“After all that’s happened today, probably every staffer in the Embassy will be at the corner pub.”

“Then let’s head to Blue Anchor. Hardy anyone goes there anymore after...”

“...It was bombed and never reopened?” she finished.

“No, silly. It’s open, you just have to know the password to get in.”

Phyllis laughed, opened the door. “Let’s just meet at Angel’s. It’s small, quiet and hasn’t been bombed—yet.”

“After work?”

“Make it seven. I’ll probably put in a long one today.”

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