

FAILURE IS NOT AN OPTION . . .



DEATH RAY

CRAIG SIMPSON

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About the Book

The Second World War is raging and Britain is in trouble.

Intelligence indicates that the Nazis have built a deadly weapon on the French coast. Could a death ray really exist? There's only one way to find out - to steal it.

Finn and Loki are Special Ops agents. Officially, they don't exist - they're perfect for this undercover mission.

A FINN GUNNERSEN ADVENTURE



DEATH RAY

CRAIG SIMPSON

RHCP DIGITAL

*For the young men and women who bravely carried their
heavy suitcases into battle*

Special Operations Personnel Files

MOST SECRET

NAME: Finn Gunnersen



REGISTERED
576834075-9

APPROVED

AGE: 16

BACKGROUND: Born Trondheim, Norway. Father RAF Spitfire pilot (killed in action). Mother and sister arrested by Gestapo. Escaped from occupied Norway by stealing Heinkel 115 float plane.

ASSESSMENT: Outwardly unremarkable.

Taught to fly by father. Physically fit though not strong. Quick to learn and resourceful. Responds well under pressure though tendency to be rather reckless. Inseparable from Mr Larson and Miss Haukelid. A decent, honest lad. Brave but vulnerable. Far more courageous than he realises. Keen to follow in father's footsteps.

RECOMMENDED
FOR ACTIVE SERVICE
IN THE FIELD
0619-3199-46

Special Operations Personnel Files

MOST SECRET

NAME: Loki Larson



AGE: 16

BACKGROUND: Born Trondheim, Norway. Father commercial pilot and member of local resistance. Escaped with Mr Gunnersen.

ASSESSMENT: A large lad and as strong as an elk. Taught to fly by father. Good with his fists. Might be prone to shoot first and ask questions later. A loyal and courageous chap who can be relied on in a crisis. Loki and Finn are lifelong friends and work well as a team. Loki also close to Miss Haukelid (potential problem?)



Special Operations Personnel Files

MOST SECRET

NAME: Freya Haukelid



AGE: 16

BACKGROUND: Born in remote part of Norway.

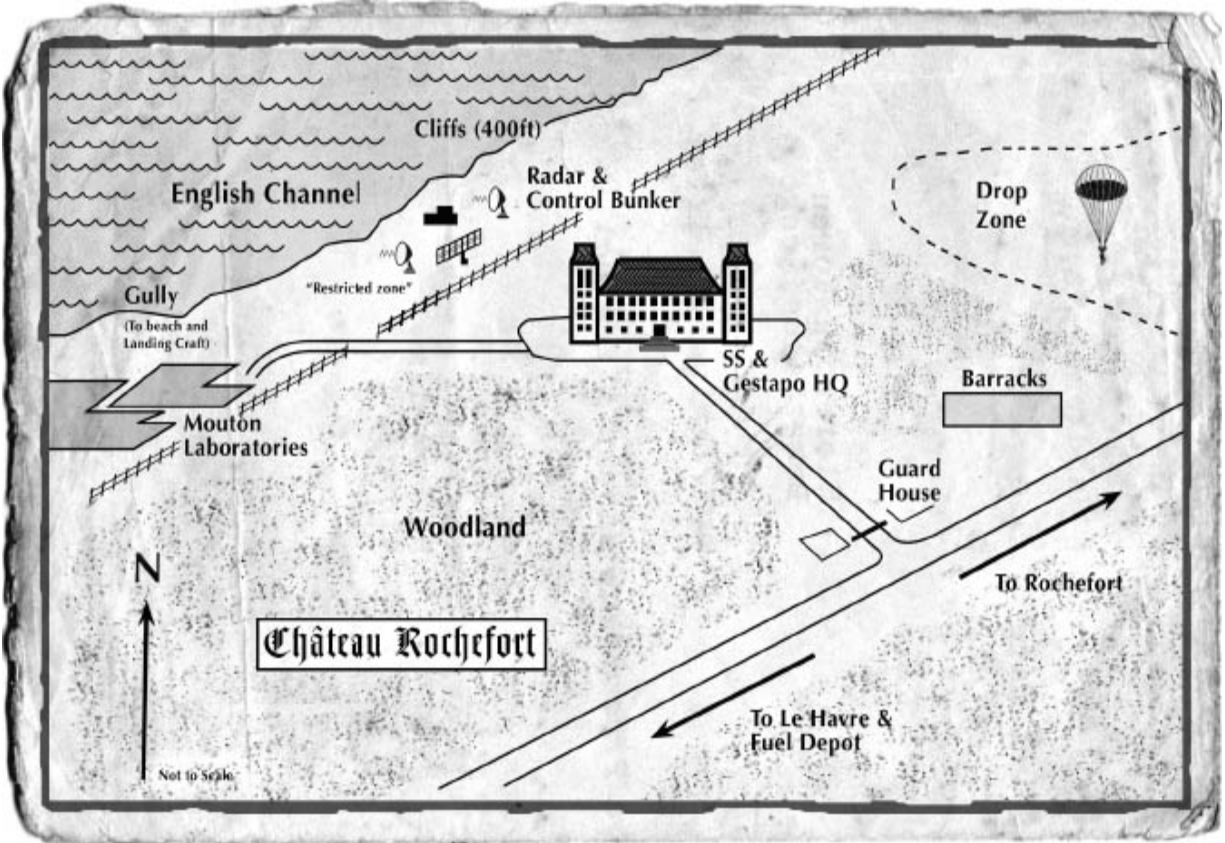
Father arrested for actively resisting occupation.
Mother deceased.

ASSESSMENT: An intelligent girl with tremendous talents. Taught by her father, Freya is an outstanding marksman (rifle) - the best we've come across. Gifted at coding and Morse code, and learns languages quickly. Physically far tougher than her appearance suggests. Despite reservations about sending girls into the field, Freya has the determination and quick-wittedness to succeed.

RECOMMENDED
FOR ACTIVE SERVICE
AS W/T OPERATOR
0619-7639-25

During a war many people have no choice but to fight. Others volunteer out of a sense of duty to King and Country, claiming they are fighting for freedom or to protect their way of life. Some, however, go to war for much more personal reasons - for revenge, or to protect those they love. These are the most powerful reasons of all - and the most dangerous. To protect those you love is a basic instinct and you will stop at nothing to defend them, even if it means betraying others who have entrusted their lives to you. As a member of Special Operations I have learned to question why my fellow agents volunteered. If it was for love or revenge, then it is time for me to start worrying and to watch out for the enemy within.

Finn Gunnensen
1941



Chapter One

Heading South

January 1941

MAJOR BAXTER'S PARTING WORDS on the platform of Glasgow station gave me the shivers. 'Well, we've taught you all we can in the precious little time available to us. In God's name I just pray it's enough,' he declared as he reached out and shook each of our hands in turn. His crushing grip said *Good luck, give them hell, and Be safe*, all in one. I think he wanted to salute us too, but that wouldn't have looked right, a soldier saluting three sixteen-year-olds. People would have thought that rather strange. Of course, Major Baxter knew what *they* didn't - he knew who and what we were.

A horrible truth dawned on me. To all intents and purposes we didn't exist, not officially, except to the leaders of Special Operations who had our details filed away under lock and key in folders marked MOST SECRET. It was odd knowing that passers-by would barely give us a second glance, not guessing in a million years that we were rapidly becoming pawns in the fight against Hitler's Germany. Without uniforms we looked ordinary, like any other civilians, and that was exactly the point. Ordinary was good, perfect in fact, because that's exactly how secret agents should appear.

A shrill whistle and the frantic slamming of carriage doors heralded our departure. The train jolted forward, slowly gathering pace. I could hear the massive steam locomotive puffing and straining, her huge wheels screeching as they struggled for grip. I spent a moment

looking out the misted window. Faces floated past like ghosts. Arms waved. Then it all became a blur. Suddenly the station was gone.

We were heading to London, where we'd change trains before completing our journey. Our final destination was 'classified'. I tried asking, of course, but got the standard reply, a rather worrying 'You'll find out soon enough.'

The corridors of our train were jam-packed with troops and their rifles and kit bags. The floor was slippery, and the stale oppressive air full of cigarette smoke, idle chatter, sneezes and hacking coughs, and the odours of damp cloth and leather. I suspected many of these men had been among the troops heroically plucked from the beaches at Dunkirk the previous summer, in what optimists were calling 'the most successful escape in history'. The word 'retreat' was taboo.

Captain Nils Jacobsen slid shut the door to our compartment and pulled down the blind. Nils was accompanying us on our journey into the unknown. Like Freya, Loki and me, he was Norwegian too. In an unfamiliar foreign country it was good having him around. He knew the ropes. He was in his late twenties, but he looked older: the wrinkles around his tired eyes - eyes that had witnessed many dreadful things - were hallmarks of the stresses and strains of being a fighter pilot. Yet he was cheerful and always grinning and joking.

Gathering up our damp coats and gas masks Nils piled them up on an empty seat. Everyone had to carry their smelly rubber *nosebags* at all times. I often wondered if they really worked but hoped I'd never find out.

Loki and Freya slumped down opposite me, Loki occupying the window seat. Resting her head on his shoulder, Freya closed her eyes and let out a weary sigh. In truth we were all exhausted. For the previous three weeks we'd been hidden away in an isolated Scottish hunting lodge near a

place called Arisaig on the west coast. The spectacular Highlands, with its many craggy mountains and deep lochs, reminded me of our homeland. The area was 'Restricted', the War Department banning everyone except those involved with Special Operations from stepping foot inside the zone. We'd got to know the area well while being taught the clandestine arts of reconnaissance, concealment and sabotage by Major Baxter and his men.

Nils unfolded his damp newspaper and handed it to me. 'OK, Finn, get reading out loud.'

I groaned, but seized the paper anyway. We had to practise our English every day, to try and lose our native Norwegian accents. I began with the front page. London had been bombed for the fourth night running. The Blitz had claimed another dozen lives. It was grim reading. As I searched the pages for something lighter, I slipped into my native Norwegian and asked, 'How come the Luftwaffe's still pounding us to oblivion? I thought we'd won the battle of the skies.'

Nils grimaced. 'Winning the Battle of Britain was only a partial victory, Finn. It hasn't stopped the bombing, but on the plus side, we've forced the Luftwaffe to limit most of its raids to the hours of darkness. Their losses would be unsustainable otherwise. And it has almost certainly delayed an invasion: Hitler won't risk crossing the Channel unless he has absolute air superiority.'

'Is there any way of stopping them once and for all?' I asked.

'Doubt it,' Nils replied with a little shrug. 'Our RDF system's good, but not that good.'

Freya briefly opened her eyes. 'What's RDF?'

'Radio Direction Finding,' Nils replied. 'Some call it *radar*.'

We'd never heard of it but wanted to know more.

Nils explained. 'The system uses radio waves, just like wireless sets, only much more powerful. Transmitters along

the coastline send out pulses. These pulses bounce off anything solid - like aircraft - and get reflected back. Sensitive receivers pick up the return signals. The aerials are directional and, using the time it takes for the pulses to return, it's possible to work out how far away the aircraft are. The radar operators relay the information to us pilots and then it's down to us to intercept the enemy.'

Nils reached out and took my paper from me. Removing a pen from his pocket, he drew a diagram to illustrate. 'The aerials are huge, Finn, about three hundred feet tall. You can't miss them. I've seen them myself while flying coastal patrols.'

Loki leaned forward for a better look at Nils' picture. 'If they're that big, surely Fritz has seen them too? Why haven't they just bombed the hell out of them?'

Scratching his chin, Nils pulled a face. 'Good point, Loki. If I was Fritz and knew what these aerials were for, I'd make destroying them my first priority. Blow them to smithereens. The fact that hasn't happened suggests that Fritz doesn't know what they are. Maybe he just thinks they're ordinary radio transmitters.'

Nils had taken part in many frenetic dogfights. He'd flown alongside my father, who'd travelled to England and joined the RAF when war broke out. Father had been determined to play his part. And his wish was fulfilled, although ultimately it cost him his life. I was proud of him. People had begun calling Pilots like him *the few*, men to whom so much was owed. Of course *the few* had become *fewer*. Britain was desperately short of pilots. 'Was radar much use to you during the Battle of Britain?' I asked.

After a little thought Nils answered my question. 'Yes. Without radar our fighter squadrons wouldn't have been scrambled in time. It gave us a few precious minutes to get airborne, achieve sufficient altitude and locate the enemy.' He paused before continuing. 'Even now they pick up the incoming night bombers while they're still out over the sea.'

Our lads try their best to intercept them but darkness gives the enemy the edge.’ He began chewing the end of his pen. ‘What we really need is to have some sort of radar inside our cockpits. Then we’d effectively be able to see in the dark.’

Loki stretched out a leg and gave Nils a friendly kick. ‘Why don’t you just eat more carrots?’ he joked.

We laughed. It was said that British pilots ate lots of carrots because they thought it helped them to see in the dark.

‘Do the Germans have this *radar* as well?’ asked Freya.

Nils nodded. ‘We believe so. In fact, there’s a nasty rumour that they have developed a new long-range system, one which gives them even more time to get their fighters airborne.’

‘Do you think it’s true?’

‘It would make sense. Bomber Command has been experiencing horrendous losses recently. No sooner do they reach the French coast than the enemy swarms about them like flies around a rotting carcass. It’s one hell of a problem.’

‘Well, if they do have it, it must look very different,’ Loki observed.

‘What do you mean?’ I asked.

‘If their system’s like ours with all those weird tall aerials, our fighter patrols would have spotted them, wouldn’t they? Presumably they haven’t or we’d know about it. So Fritz’s radar system must look different.’

‘I expect you’re right,’ said Nils.

I resumed reading for about twenty minutes before noticing that everyone else looked as though they were dozing off. Loki, Freya and me were bound together by more than just a lifetime’s friendship. Loki’s parents, Freya’s father, and my mother and sister all languished back home in the dark, dank prison cells of Trondheim’s Kristiansten Fortress – all guests of the infamous Gestapo.

The fate of our loved ones was as uncertain as our own and the three of us were united by the dream of their safe release, or of one day returning to free them. With Germany seemingly winning the war, a happy outcome felt far, far away - way beyond our reach.

Our helplessness frequently bubbled to the surface as anger and frustration. We leaned heavily on each other for support. Nils played his part too, reminding us that as far as we knew they were still alive. 'Where there's life, there's hope,' he'd say. Often, *hope* on its own just didn't seem enough.

Loki started to snore. I pressed my head against the back of the seat and closed my eyes too. At Arisaig we'd been up before dawn every day, out running in all weathers over gruelling terrain, then ordered to swim back and forth in the icy waters of the lochs. That was part one of our training. It was no holiday, or like any school I'd ever been to before. It was tough. No allowances were made for the fact we were just kids. We all knew that should we fail or display weakness, our time in Special Ops would be over. We'd learned a lot. Stuff like how to camouflage ourselves in the wilderness, how to avoid detection when crossing open ground, how to build shelters, blow up railway lines - basically how to hit the enemy hard and survive on the run.

Although we'd now left the Highlands behind, our training was far from over. There was a second phase, a second school, somewhere incredibly secret, where we were to be taught spycraft and Lord knows what else. That's where we were heading now. It was a daunting prospect not least because it brought us a step closer to active service, to our first real Special Operation.

Chapter Two

London's Burning, Fire Fire!

IT WAS EARLY evening when we arrived in London. The blackout meant there were few lights to see by. The air was thick with steam and soot, and my nose itched like mad.

'There should be a car waiting outside the station,' Nils announced as we all jumped down onto the platform. 'We have to go across the city to catch the next train from Waterloo. But we've got plenty of time.'

Ambling alongside waiting trains, I watched women on tiptoe hug their men, refusing to let go. There were tears and handkerchiefs, sobs and laughter, smiles and frowns – a whole kaleidoscope of emotions. I realized it was their last desperate moment before parting and I knew that for some there'd be no return. There were lines of small children too, their raincoats buttoned up, their hats and caps pulled down over their ears. Each wore a name tag as though they were an item of luggage, and each carried their gas mask in a little box with shoulder straps. At their feet rested small bags and suitcases, just one each, as though they were off on a short holiday. Some looked excited, a few bewildered, but a good many were crying their eyes out. Women with clipboards were clucking round them, keeping them in line and doing their best to be cheerful. 'What's going on?' I asked.

'They're being evacuated. Should have gone months ago,' Nils replied.

'Evacuated where?'

'All over the place. Basically, anywhere outside the city. Families will take them in and look after them until it's safe for them to return.'

Many of the children were incredibly young. Poor blighters. I smiled as I passed two small grinning boys with cheap-looking toy tin helmets on their heads and wooden rifles in their hands. I saluted them and laughed when they stood to attention and saluted me back. We had something in common - we were all going on an adventure. I just hoped theirs would be less dangerous than ours.

Exiting the station, Nils set about searching for our transport. I'd never been to London before and I soaked up the atmosphere: the hectic streets, the buses, the men on street corners selling newspapers. The city was bustling, frantic, alive. I took a deep breath. After hours of being cooped up on the train it felt good to stretch my legs. There were posters everywhere. One showed a soldier pointing at us and bore the words, *'Is your journey really necessary?'* Yes! I found myself thinking. Another showed a sinking ship with the caption, *'A few careless words may end in this'*. It was a reminder to avoid discussing the movements of ships or troops. Not all were so threatening though. One showed a boy clutching a spade and said *'Dig for Victory'*.

'Look at those!' Loki announced excitedly, pointing upwards.

'What?' Following his outstretched arm, I gazed to the heavens and saw shapes in the moonlight. They resembled flabby inflatable elephants and were rapidly rising into the night sky - barrage balloons. I'd read about them. They were huge, over sixty feet long and thirty feet tall, and were filled with hydrogen. Tethered to the ground by a long steel cable, they could be winched up or down thousands of feet in just minutes. I felt alarmed by the sight of them and the inevitable question that sprang to mind. Did they always raise them after dusk, or was trouble heading our way?

Loki yawned. 'At least they'll force the Luftwaffe to keep to higher altitudes.'

'Uh-huh. I'd hate to fly into the supporting cables. They'd cut an aircraft in half.' We both peered up a while. 'I wonder what would happen if one exploded? I wouldn't want to be standing beneath it!'

'Yeah, imagine thousands of feet of cable falling out of the sky.'

Nils ran from one parked car to another, tapping on windows and asking the drivers if they were under orders to escort us across town. Finally, he reached the last vehicle, looked back towards us and shrugged apologetically.

'Oh great!' Freya cursed. 'What do we do now?'

Suddenly something cut through the air. It began as a low-pitched hum but rapidly rose into a screaming whine before oscillating between the two extremes - an air-raid siren! The wailing horror put the fear of God into me. Raising the barrage balloons was no exercise, I realized. Someone knew the enemy was coming! People stopped whatever they were doing and scurried for cover. Nils hurried back and shouted, 'Just what we didn't need. We'll head for the nearest shelter.'

We quickly found ourselves amid a huddle making for the entrance to an underground station. Caught up in the mêlée, we descended the steps. It felt as if we were being carried along on a tidal wave. People pushed and shoved, swore and complained. 'Get a bleedin' move on!' yelled a tall fellow impatiently.

'Faff off!' someone else replied angrily.

I was amazed people didn't trip and fall and disappear beneath a hundred trampling feet. Then again, I supposed Londoners were used to the drill. Eventually we found ourselves in a long corridor close to the subterranean platform, at least fifty feet below ground level. I heard someone shout, 'Mind the gap', and moments later caught a glimpse of a train slowly snaking its way towards the black of a tunnel. We didn't have underground railways

back home, except those that ran through the mountains. Gradually panic was replaced by a sense of relief sweeping through the crowds. We'd made it! We were safe.

'How long will we have to stay down here?' asked Freya. 'It's awful. It stinks.'

'As long as it takes,' Nils replied. 'Until we get the all clear.'

The station filled rapidly. I noticed that most came prepared, some with books, games and blankets under their arms, others weighed down with bags of food. Some looked as if they'd been here for hours already.

The atmosphere was humid and heavy, the air smelling stale, full of dirt and grime. But the people of London seemed a cheery lot, and I heard laughter as well as babies crying. I watched four men play cards and one of them lose half a crown to the others. To my right an elderly chap began a tune on his mouth organ while tapping his feet. Young children sat in a circle and amused themselves with games.

The first bomb fell. It sounded little more than a dull, distant thud. It was strangely reassuring - sounding so far away it surely meant we were safe. But it was quickly followed by more vibrating thumps and bangs: the detonations arrived in clusters, and they grew louder. And louder!

The chatter ceased. Only the cries of griping toddlers broke the hush. It was as if everyone was holding their breath. I tried to imagine what the crews of the German bombers were thinking as they reached out and flipped their bomb-release toggles, their planes lurching upwards, their heavy load of munitions tumbling from the belly of their metallic death machines. Did they care about the horror they'd unleashed? Or was it all too far away, too unreal, *too unimaginable*?

A bomb fell nearby. I flinched as the lights flickered. Another struck. The lights went out for a few seconds and

then came back on. People lifted newspapers to shield their heads from the dust and dirt falling from cracks between the bricks in the ceiling. Then more bombs arrived. The place shook. I shook. Loki seized Freya and held her tightly. I heard people praying aloud. We all knew the truth: our place of refuge was safe – unless it suffered a direct hit. Then we might be killed or buried alive. The thunder above us seemed unrelenting, as if an angry giant's boot was stamping down on us. The lights went out, and this time they didn't come back on. People switched on their torches. I felt a hand reach out and grasp mine. It was Freya's. I squeezed it tightly. Another bomb struck and our underground world shook. To my left a woman cried out.

Then it stopped. There were no more bombs.

Eventually the siren wailed the all clear.

Slowly people made their way to the surface. What greeted us made me swallow hard. We'd emerged into a very different London. The evening was lit by an awful, flickering, orange glow. It was hot too. Buildings were ablaze, ferocious flames roaring and spitting. The air was thick with the strange odours of cordite and petroleum, reminding me of spent fireworks. Twisted pieces of shrapnel lay on the pavement amid the rubble; the chunks of bomb casings possessed edges that looked sharp enough to slice through human flesh. We spun on our heels and tried to take it all in.

'They dropped incendiaries,' Nils shouted. 'That's why the fires are so fierce. In some ways they're worse than the bombs. And it looks like the main station has taken some direct hits.'

I saw a crater in the road. Twenty feet wide and ten feet deep, a burst water main inside it spouted high into the night air. It looked like a fountain. Falling droplets sparkled. They almost looked beautiful. To my right a car was on fire. It burned brightly. As flames consumed it, acrid black smoke lifted into the sky. Then I saw that the driver

was still sitting behind the steering wheel. I felt the contents of my stomach rise up and looked the other way.

‘Jesus, Finn!’ Loki placed a comforting arm around Freya’s shoulder and held her close. ‘This is hell on earth.’

‘I’ve never seen anything like it,’ I yelled, shielding my face from the searing heat. My palms were shiny with sweat. ‘Even when they bombed Trondheim back home, it wasn’t on this scale.’

Wriggling free of Loki’s grasp, Freya declared, ‘We should try to help.’

‘Best leave it to others,’ said Nils, anxiously looking round. ‘We’ve got to get across the city. It could take hours in all this chaos.’

‘No,’ Freya replied firmly. ‘There were hundreds of people in the station. Maybe some of them didn’t get out. We’ve got to help.’

‘She’s right,’ I said. ‘At least until the fire service gets here.’

Reluctantly Nils agreed. We ran back into the station. Part of the roof had collapsed. The ticket office was now a pile of bricks. A group of men were frantically grabbing fragments of masonry, chunks of wood and metal, and flinging them to one side of a smoking mound. We got to work beside them, pausing every minute or two to see if anyone could hear the muffled voices of those trapped. Fifteen minutes’ hard graft yielded nothing more than a shoe, an umbrella and a rag doll. All the while buildings around the station glowed, the air filled with spitting and crackling flames as the roaring fire storms tore through one storey after another. Hearing the bells of ambulances, I stopped for a second to wipe the sweat from my brow.

A fire tender with a dozen more men arrived. Unable to manoeuvre the vehicle onto the platform, instead they unrolled their hoses and set about connecting them to a large, camouflaged water tank and to nearby hydrants. As they began dousing the flames the mass of white hose pipes

jerked and wriggled like intertwined snakes. The pressure caused water to spray from poorly sealed connections and form small streams which became waterfalls as they cascaded over the edge of the platform. Wardens wearing helmets and armbands began trying to bring order to the streets outside, telling people to keep back, yelling that it was too dangerous and that buildings might collapse at any moment. It was mayhem.

Defeated, having not saved a soul, we eventually gave up. We headed for the exit, or rather what was left of it – mangled iron railings and gates, and smouldering wood. After a few paces I stopped dead. By my right boot was a small tin helmet. Further to my right was another mountain of rubble. The others kept going but I was glued to the spot. Those evacuees, I thought. Surely they'd heeded the air-raid warning. Surely one of those small boys had simply dropped his tin helmet in the rush to get to the shelters. Surely ...

I thought I heard a whimper. It came from the mound. 'Hey!' I called out. 'There's someone under here. Quick, come and help.'

The others returned and we were joined by three young men in uniform. One spoke with a French accent, another sounded Polish. We grabbed, yanked, pulled and heaved, chucking rubble to one side. Others came to help. I found myself gasping for breath, sweat dripping from my nose, my heart pounding. We didn't stop. We kept digging.

'Here!' someone shouted.

I could see a small foot. It was buried deep and we'd have to be careful lifting stuff off in case everything slipped and crushed whoever was beneath. Feverishly we continued clearing a way down. Then, far to my right, Loki called out, 'I can see an arm.'

There were two bodies! We divided ourselves into teams. It became a race. Eventually Nils and I grasped each end of a long heavy plank. On the count of three, we slowly lifted

it and flung it aside. I gasped. We'd revealed a small, pale face, all covered in dust and grime. The child looked calm, peaceful, as if he was just taking a nap. I reached down, cleared away some more bricks, grabbed hold of the boy's coat collar and pulled. His eyes flashed open. I let out a cry of surprise. 'He's alive!' I shouted. The boy took a small gasp of air. Then his eyes rolled back into his head. 'He doesn't look good.' I pulled him free. Nils snatched the child from me and rushed him into the arms of the ambulance men. We crowded round as they set to work. And we let out a cheer when, moments later, the lad coughed and spluttered, colour returned to his cheeks and he began sobbing loudly for his mother.

I turned and spotted Loki crouching next to Freya by the mountain of wreckage we'd been dismantling by hand, brick by brick. Half a dozen others were standing round them. I charged back. 'Hey, he's still alive!' I shouted, skidding to a halt. 'How are you doing? Can I help? You OK?'

Freya looked up at me and shook her head. I saw both fury and tears in her eyes. Another small boy was cradled in her arms. I recognized him. He was one of the lads I'd seen earlier. He couldn't have been more than six years old. His lifeless brown eyes stared straight up into mine. I felt sick. Britain was at war, and this was what war looked like.

Loki raised his head and gazed to the heavens. 'You bastards!' he shouted at the top of his voice. 'You *bloody, bloody bastards!*'

Chapter Three

Far from Prying Eyes

IT WAS ALMOST midnight when our train finally pulled into the tiny station. We were the only passengers left in our carriage. I shook Loki and Freya awake and Nils gathered up our gas masks. Warily we stepped out into the cool night air.

‘Where the hell are we?’ Loki asked irritably, stretching his arms above his head and yawning. We glanced about for signs. There weren’t any. The station was unlit, the small ticket office deserted. In the moonlight I saw half a dozen ponies huddled together for warmth at the far end of the platform. *Ponies?* Confused, I scratched my head.

‘There should be a truck waiting,’ said Nils. ‘Not far to go now. And with any luck there’ll be steaming mugs of cocoa waiting for us.’ He led the way towards the exit.

‘This place is weird,’ I observed, noticing that apart from the ticket office and a couple of small cottages there were no other buildings to be seen. All I could make out in the darkness were distant trees in an otherwise flat, open terrain. Surely stations were normally close to cities, towns and villages, I thought. Close to people. Not this one. This one lay at the heart of nowhere.

Our transport, a battered old army truck, was indeed waiting, parked on an area of hard standing outside the station. A rather scruffy soldier leaped out of the cab, ran up to us and saluted Nils half-heartedly, his hand barely reaching his own chin. ‘Welcome, sir,’ he said cheerfully. ‘Do you have any luggage?’

‘No,’ said Nils. ‘It was sent on ahead.’

The soldier looked surprised. 'What, not even a delivery for us?'

Nils shrugged. 'No. Sorry.'

'Damn. The buggers said it would be on your train. Wait here a minute. Shan't be a tick.' The soldier ran off into the station, returning a few seconds later with a broad grin, lugging a heavy-looking sack. 'Phew! They'd have my ruddy guts for garters if I'd left this here.'

'What's in it?' I asked.

'Nazi uniforms!' He laughed heartily. 'Last delivery got left here for days. Right mix-up. Some old dear took a peek and fainted on the spot. Thought Jerry had arrived on our shores and left his dirty laundry out. Daft old bat. Right-o, hop aboard. It's only a ten-minute ride to Mulberry House. Brigadier Devlin is eagerly awaiting your arrival. I'm Corporal Smith, by the way. Smithy to my friends.'

We clambered into the back of the truck and sat down on small benches. The diesel engine started up, and with a hefty jolt we rattled off on the final leg of our journey.

* * *

Mulberry House lay at the end of a long track that wound through dense woodland. At the gated entrance, complete with cattle grid, our truck stopped and more soldiers inspected our papers by torch light before allowing us to proceed. The vehicle drew to a halt again outside the main entrance. Jumping down onto the gravel drive, we all stared at our new home, a large brick house with tall chimney stacks reaching up into the night sky. In the moonlight, the word bleak sprang to mind as a chill wind whipped about my neck. I shivered and my hair prickled as if full of nits. Looking round, I noticed that there was a small cottage at the side of the main house, partially hidden in the trees.

The door to Mulberry opened and light spilled out. A figure appeared. 'I know an army marches on its stomach,' he bellowed, before adding, 'Well if you don't like it, you can lump it!' It took me a few seconds to realize he was talking to someone inside the house. He turned and quickly surveyed the four of us, his eyes settling on Nils. 'Ah, Captain Jacobsen. Glad to see you all made it in one piece. Splendid. Come in, come in.' He stepped to one side and beckoned us across the threshold. 'I'm Brigadier Devlin. Sorry about all that just now. Mrs Saunders made mock hare soup - a special treat, apparently. Didn't go down too well I'm afraid.'

'What's mock hare soup?' asked Freya.

'Well, miss, mock hare soup is exactly the same as real hare soup except it's made without any hare.'

Freya frowned. We all frowned.

'That's rationing for you, I'm afraid,' the brigadier added, shrugging. 'Cook likes to experiment! You'll soon get used to it.'

The four of us were told to wait in the large drawing room. Freya warmed her hands in front of a roaring log fire while Nils slumped in a leather chair and began impatiently drumming his fingers on its arm. Loki and I wandered around the room inspecting the various paintings and maps hung on the walls and the many tatty books wedged in equally tatty bookcases.

The door opened and the man we knew only as 'X' breezed in. He still had his raincoat and trilby on and he was clutching a thin leather document bag. He was followed by three others: the brigadier, another man in army uniform and a woman carrying a tray.

'Welcome,' said X, making a point of greeting each of us with a warm smile and vice-like handshake. Then he removed his hat and coat and fiddled with the clasp of his bag. 'Help yourselves to cocoa,' he said. 'Oh, and this is