LET THE HUNT BEGIN .

SPECIAL

CRAIGSIMPSON

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About the Book

NOVEMBER 1941

Special Ops agent, Finn Gunnersen has been sent into Nazi-occupied Paris along with fellow agents Loki and Freya. His mission is to find a rogue British agent who knows secrets that will endanger countless innocent British lives. But the traitorous agent is a master of disguise and digging for information in enemy territory is dangerous. The Special Ops team follow the slippery trail of the agent through the sinister streets of Paris, attracting the attention of the Secret Nazi Police and placing themselves in grave danger ...



CORGI BOOKS





WESTLAND LYSANDER (SPECIAL DUTIES SQUADRON) Photo courtesy of the Shuttleworth Collection and Darren Harbar <u>www.focalplaneimages.co.uk</u>

I was there on that cold winter's night when the famous conjurer and escapologist, Madura the Magnificent, took to the dimly lit stage in Nazi-occupied Paris for the very last time. Understandably, he was extremely nervous. He knew that he had to give the greatest performance of his life. You see, there were those who wanted him dead. Madura's crime was simply that he knew too much.

With our enemies in hot pursuit, as agents with Special Operations we had to become magicians of sorts as well. Not to entertain or enthral a crowd, but in a desperate bid to escape and save lives.

Finn Gunnersen, December 1941

[For updated Personnel Files, see back of book]

MOST SECRET

It is winter 1941, and Nazi Germany has a firm grasp over much of Europe. Almost daily, Britain continues to endure the destruction of the Blitz. To protect her cities and vital airfields, men working in great secrecy have dreamed up clever ways to deceive the enemy. Countless innocent lives depend on their success. Should the enemy ever discover these deceptions, it could prove catastrophic.

Finn Gunnersen and best friends Loki Larson and Freya Haukelid have been recruited into a clandestine organization called Special Operations. Under orders of the prime minister, Winston Churchill, this most secret organization is tasked with going forth and setting Europe ablaze, and aiding fledging Resistance movements in the fight against Nazi oppression and tyranny. If called upon, our heroes must also defend Britain's secrets at all costs, even if it means hunting down one of their own. Needless to say, it is extremely hazardous work. This story is inspired by real events.

Chapter One The Ministry of Tricks

November 1941.

LONDON WAS COVERED in dust. I'd never seen so much dust. Glowing embers drifted through the streets like a swarm of fireflies. The choking smell of charred timber hung in the air. It got right up my nose, making me cough and wheeze. Jabbing at the car's horn in frustration, our driver, Sergeant Walker, negotiated a way through the carnage as if taking part in a giant obstacle race. ARP wardens with armbands and tin hats waved frantically, yelling to him that the way ahead was blocked. Cursing under his breath, Walker crunched the gear lever into reverse.

Loki, Freya and I couldn't help gawping at the insane destruction. The sheer scale of it was mind-blowing. During the night, wave after wave of bombers, each one hundred strong, had unleashed tons of murder from their bellies. Parts of the city had been engulfed in a raging, swirling firestorm, while other areas had simply been pulverized into oblivion.

Windows had been blown in, and now and again we passed houses where entire walls had been ripped down, or had simply collapsed, exposing the insides. You could see wallpaper patterns, pictures still hanging crookedly on their hooks, chairs, beds and linen barely disturbed – it was really weird. Walker told us that stuff sometimes avoids the blast and looks untouched. 'Bodies too,' he added soberly. 'Recovered without a blemish on them. That's what happens in a firestorm. It sucks all the oxygen from the air. Basically, the poor sods suffocate.'

The thought made my blood run cold.

'Stop the car!' Freya shouted suddenly.

Alarmed, Walker slammed on the brakes and we screeched to a halt. Freya flung open the door and leaped out.

'What the devil?' Walker snapped his head round in consternation. 'Oi, come back, miss – we're late enough as it is.'

Freya shot across the road and knelt on the pavement in front of a small boy. Clutching a soot-stained teddy bear in one hand, a thumb firmly wedged in his mouth, he looked bewildered, as if he'd just woken up and found himself on another planet; a very hostile planet. Loki and I were out of the car in a flash too.

'Come back!' Walker shouted, slamming a fist on the steering wheel.

We ignored him.

'His name's Sam,' said Freya.

Sam was about three or four years old, his ill-fitting hand-me-down short trousers and tiny duffel coat filthy with the same reddish-grey brick dust that coated everything else. His blue eyes were piercing. Scrunching up his small round face, he opened his mouth as wide as it would go and yelled.

'There, there, don't worry.' Freya gave him a hug, and then used her handkerchief to wipe away his tears and the dribbles of snot from under his nose. 'Poor lamb. Must be lost. Where do you live, Sam? Where's your mum?'

Sam pointed. Twisting round, I looked back along the road and saw the mountain of rubble that had once been a row of shops. Fearing the worst, I swallowed hard. I didn't wish to alarm Sam, so I said calmly, 'Let's ask around. See if we can find someone who knows him.'

Our frantic enquiries met with blank faces and shakes of the head. Walker parked up further along the road and came marching back towards us, his purposeful stride practised on the military parade ground. 'Leave him! We must get to Whitehall. It's important. We've a long day ahead of us, and if it all goes pear-shaped, the brigadier will have my ruddy guts for garters. Somebody will no doubt take care of him.'

It came out sounding all wrong – way too blunt – and Freya turned on him. 'Not until I know he's in safe hands,' she demanded. Her fierce glare halted Walker in his tracks.

'I didn't mean it to sound ... Sorry, miss, but, you know – orders and ... Listen, we'll find a policeman, or—'

'Sam! Sam! Where are you?' The shrill woman's voice cut through the air like a javelin. '*There* you are, Sam. Thank the bleedin' Lord.'

A young woman dressed in navy blue overalls, her curly blonde hair covered with a pale yellow and brown polka-dot silk scarf, was running towards us, elbows pumping, the steel-tipped heels of her stout shoes click-clacking a frantic rhythm on the pavement. Breathless, she scooped Sam up and cradled him in her arms. 'I thought I'd lost you,' she said, smothering his face with kisses while jigging him up and down and patting his back. She smiled at us over Sam's shoulder. 'Ta for looking after him. Silly sausage went wandering off. Told you not to, didn't I, Sam? I don't know - all I did was turn my back for a minute.' She jerked her head in the direction she'd come from. 'I was busy digging, see. Whole bleedin' street got taken out.'

'Find anyone alive?' Loki asked.

She nodded. 'Luckily most had taken to the shelters. But I was worried about my Uncle Jack. He lives at number twenty-three, see, and the daft old bugger always refuses to go underground. Reckons being in the shelter's like sitting in your own grave. He fought in the trenches in the last war – hated confined spaces ever since. Swore he'd never run from the enemy either. Stubborn, he is, and as tetchy as a mule with a splitting headache. Anyways, he was coming home from the King's Arms down Lanyard Street when the air-raid sirens started up their infernal whining. Said he just shook his fist at the sky and carried on walking. He was still a ways from home when his house was flattened. Saw it drop, he did. Bloody great big bomb thousand-pounder, he reckons. Anyways, he's fine, and that's all that matters.' Sam's mother beamed with a cheerfulness that seemed completely at odds with the world around. 'We found Madge Warburton from number twenty-nine with nothing more than cuts and grazes too,' she continued brightly. 'Poor old dear was sitting on her outside lav when it fell. Blast blew the door right off its hinges. Gave her quite a fright, I can tell you. We found her still sitting there, knickers round her ankles, staring blankly into space and mumbling the Lord's Prayer over and over. Shock, I expect. We'll never hear the last of it!' She sighed heavily and looked expectantly at Sergeant Walker. 'What kind of world have our children been born into, eh, Sergeant? Explain it to me. I want to know. Why all the hate? Why can't we all live in peace?'

Punch-drunk from her tirade of impossible questions, a disconcerted Walker straightened his cap and briskly tapped his watch to bring our conversation to an end. 'Must be off. Nice meeting you. Come on, you three. No more dilly-dallying.'

Much to his relief, we said our goodbyes and were soon on our way again. The streets around Piccadilly were scenes of utter chaos as well, some blocked by rubble, others a jam of ambulances and fire tenders, their hoses snaking along gutters that had become swollen streams of muddy brown water. Men and women were frantically clearing busted masonry and wood, desperately searching for loved ones, friends, neighbours, total strangers, *anyone*. Another hellish night had passed. And yet, as we drove through this vision of the underworld, I could see defiance and determination shining from weary, sweaty faces of Londoners who'd not had a decent night's sleep in weeks.

Sergeant Walker drove us up Shaftesbury Avenue, then down Charing Cross Road, past Nelson's Column, and finally into Whitehall. 'Here we are,' he announced, pulling up beside the kerb. 'Sit tight. Shan't be a tick.' He clambered out, and hurried in through a doorway hidden behind a shoulder-high stack of sandbags.

Loki stretched out his arms and yawned. 'This had all better be worth it,' he grumbled.

It had been an early start – up before dawn for the long drive from our HQ, Mulberry House, hidden away in the New Forest by the south coast. According to our commanding officer in Special Operations, Brigadier Devlin, he'd managed to pull a few strings. He wanted us to see something rather important, rather *hush hush*. Understandably, we were burning with curiosity.

Walker returned, accompanied by a gentleman in his late fifties dressed in a pinstripe suit, long black coat, fedora and leather gloves. Walker ran ahead of him in order to open the front passenger door. The smart man from Whitehall climbed in, pausing only briefly to acknowledge our presence with a faint nod and a brief touch of his hat's curled brim.

'This is Sir Hugo Foster,' Walker told us, jumping behind the steering wheel and slamming his door shut. 'Head of the Ministry of Tricks.'

'Really, Sergeant! I hate being referred to in that way,' Sir Hugo snapped gruffly.

Walker grinned. 'Well, technically, your lot are just like us, sir. Officially, you don't exist either!'

'Quite so.' Sir Hugo turned in his seat and smiled at us grimly. The car filled with a faint whiff of stale tobacco and expensive cologne. His blotchy face was prematurely aged by the pressures of war: long hours behind a desk, endless meetings, and the responsibility that came with taking momentous decisions. He removed his hat and wearily ran his fingers through a receding mop of grey hair slicked back and glistening from an excessive dollop of Brylcreem. 'Must say, this little outing of ours is all very irregular. Winston twisted my arm over dinner at Number Ten. Wouldn't take no for an answer. Said that if your chaps saw it with their own eyes, they'd realize just how important it all is. Our work, I mean.'

'Very true, sir.' Walker glanced over his shoulder and pulled out into traffic.

Loki raised his eyebrows. Sir Hugo was on first-name terms with the prime minister, Winston Churchill. That surely made him a very important cog in the machinery of war, just like the shadowy X, the man in overall charge of Special Ops.

Crossing the Thames, we drove out of London, heading southeast through dense suburbs that gradually thinned, eventually fizzling out into countryside comprising endless fields, copses, villages and tiny hamlets. The road grew ever narrower and more twisting, and the hedgerows taller. I could figure out our general direction based on the time of day and position of the feeble winter sun. Loki whispered that we were probably heading for Kent. It was a guess – it was impossible to tell exactly which villages we were passing through as all road signs had been removed in order to confuse the enemy should they ever mount an invasion of Britain – but I suspected that he was right.

Resting her head on Loki's shoulder, Freya dozed off, and soon Loki's eyes were closed too. The pair were growing closer by the day. I don't think our superiors approved: emotion can cloud someone's judgement, and that can prove highly dangerous in our line of work. But the men in charge had said nothing, accepting that the three of us were a team whose bonds were forged from life-long friendships. We'd lived through many life-and-death moments together; situations that had strengthened our ties. While my friends slept, I remained awake, trying to figure out what all the mystery was about. Something was up, that was for sure. Telephones back at Mulberry hadn't stopped ringing for days, and Walker and the brigadier had been up burning the midnight oil poring over Top Secret intelligence reports delivered to Mulberry by a steady stream of motorcycle dispatch riders. Staring out of the window, deep in thought, I watched England pass us by in a blur.

'Any news regarding you-know-who?' Sir Hugo asked Walker. His question shattered a lengthy silence.

'No, sir. Not a dicky bird.' Pulling a face, Walker flexed his grip on the steering wheel and sniffed. 'Still, perhaps we shouldn't jump to conclusions. The situation may not be as desperate as we fear.' He leaned forward and peered out at a church spire to our left. 'I think we're nearly there, sir. I wasn't told its precise location, only to head this way and that you'd give me instructions for the final leg.'

Sir Hugo nodded and then, pointing towards a lay-by up ahead, told Walker to pull over. He did so, and the squeal of the brakes woke the others. 'Are we there?' Freya rubbed the sleep from her eyes.

'No, miss. Not quite,' said Sir Hugo. 'Be so kind as to put these on.' He passed three black velvet blindfolds into the back of the car. 'Tie them tight. Make sure you can't see a thing. That's an order. Have I made myself understood?'

'Yes, sir,' we replied as one.

Walker drove on, guided by Sir Hugo's directions. When we stopped again, voices at the window demanded to see our papers, passes and authorizations. Someone finally announced, 'Everything's in order, sir.' I heard the clack of heels and imagined a khaki-clad, pigeon-chested sentry snapping to attention and saluting. A bumpy two-minute ride later, Walker stopped and killed the engine. 'Everyone out.'

We emerged into a breezy afternoon with a faint drizzle in the air. I buttoned my coat, turned up the collar and stretched the stiffness from my back.

'OK. You can take them off now.'

Yanking my blindfold from my head, I blinked wildly to adjust my eyes to the overpowering brightness. I turned round slowly and tried to take it all in. We were standing on the middle of a runway, surrounded by flat grass stretching almost as far as the eye could see. Beneath our feet lay rigid steel netting. I'd seen it before: Sommerfeld Tracking. It was used to construct temporary runways so aircraft could take off and land in all weathers where otherwise grass would guickly turn into mud. I'd heard that pilots of larger aircraft hated it because it sometimes damaged their tyres and undercarriage, and if they came in too heavily they might even tear the stuff up. In the distance stood a two-storey concrete building - probably the Watch Office, or what some were now calling the 'Control Tower'. A hundred yards to the left of it was a large blister hangar next to a couple of Nissen huts and a row of tents. Windsocks flapped at the tops of poles. At various locations close to the perimeter fence, aircraft - mostly Spitfires, I reckoned - lay idle.

Loki nudged me. 'I don't get it, Finn. Why have they brought us here?'

Freya couldn't stop yawning. She shoved her hands in her pockets and scuffed her shoe against the ground, looking bored.

'So,' said Walker cheerfully. 'What do you think?'

'About what?' Freya snapped irritably.

Walker could barely conceal the smirk on his face. 'OK. Tell me, where are we? What is this place?'

Loki replied sarcastically, 'An airfield. In the middle of nowhere. Can we go home now?'

'Splendid,' Sir Hugo remarked, appearing extremely pleased. 'Hoped you'd say that. Now look again. *Harder* this time.'

We did. 'Still looks like an airfield to me,' I said. 'Operational too, judging by the number of aircraft out at dispersal. How many squadrons are based here? Two? Three? Any chance of having a go in one of those Spits?'

Freya's patience ran out. 'I'm freezing out here. Getting wet too. For God's sake put us out of our misery.'

'Very well,' said Sir Hugo. 'Listen up and I'll explain. Despite winning the battle of the skies last summer, we're still losing hundreds of fighter aircraft and bombers, and precious, talented aircrew.' He paused and looked at me. 'Men like your father, Mr Gunnersen.'

I was about to snap back that Father was officially missing in action, and that I'd not given up all hope, when Sir Hugo went on:

'However, not all are lost during heroic dogfights or bombing raids over Germany's industrial heartland. The Luftwaffe has once again been concentrating on targeting our airfields. Bastards are clobbering our planes while they're still on the ground.' He paused to sneeze. Vigorously wiping his nose with a starched handkerchief, he continued, 'My department was established to dream up ways of limiting the damage. Naturally I recruited only the best minds - brainy men and women who could think the unthinkable. They began by devising various new forms of camouflage, and then tried working out the best ways to disperse aircraft around the airfield to minimize losses that sort of thing. We had our successes. Unfortunately, they weren't enough. We had to come up with something else, something even better, *bigger*. And this is it.' He spread out his arms and turned through three hundred and sixty degrees. 'Ta-da! Impressive, don't you think?'

While Loki scratched his head in confusion, something clicked inside my brain. 'I get it. This isn't an airfield at all.

It just looks like one. It's an illusion.'

'What on earth are you on about, Finn?' Loki clearly thought I was nuts.

'Top marks, Mr Gunnersen,' said Sir Hugo, rubbing his hands together gleefully. 'Go and take a closer look at those aircraft. Feel free to take one up if you like. If you can!'

'Race you, Loki,' I shouted, and set off at a sprint across the grass.

We arrived beside half a dozen Spitfires on the far side of the airfield. Hands on knees, drawing deep, rasping breaths, Loki looked as gobsmacked as I was. The aircraft were no more than plywood skeletons covered with painted canvas, like cheap toys, albeit full-size ones. Up close, they'd not fool anyone for a second. But from a distance – well, they'd had me convinced. 'Amazing!'

'Let me get this right,' Loki puffed. 'They're building decoy airfields to confuse the Luftwaffe?'

'Yes, so they waste their time bombing places like this rather than *real* airfields. It's a brilliant idea. Their reconnaissance planes fly over and photograph the area at high altitude, and then back at base they study the pictures and figure it's real. Sir Hugo's men must've realized they can't conceal an entire airfield from the enemy no matter how much camouflage netting they've got – it's simply too big. Building decoys is the next best thing.'

'Doesn't stop them from bombing our real airfields as well though, Finn.'

'Quite correct, Mr Larson.' Sir Hugo and the others caught us up. 'But it means that far fewer enemy raids are successful. We've built decoys like this in a number of places. But there's a humungous problem.'

Freya ran her fingers over one of the flimsy canvas wings and then poked a hole in it. 'And I think I know what that is, Sir Hugo. They'll only work as long as the enemy doesn't know that they're fake.'

'Exactly,' replied Walker.

'And you think there's been a leak?' I asked.

Sir Hugo shrugged and nodded simultaneously. 'Possibly. One of my team has disappeared, you see. Simply vanished. Unfortunately, he possesses detailed knowledge of all the locations. Most inconvenient!'

Walker added, 'It gets worse. This isn't the only deception the Ministry of Tricks has come up with.' He turned to Sir Hugo. 'With your permission, sir, I think it's time for our little demonstration.'

Sir Hugo agreed, and Walker removed a whistle from his pocket and blew hard on it. 'As this place is well away from prying eyes, Sir Hugo's chaps use it to test out many other ingenious inventions. We thought we'd show you just one of them. Prepare yourselves to be amazed.'

A man emerged from a building several hundred yards away and waved a red flag.

Walker waved back. 'Ah, good, looks like they're all set.'

'I suppose it's safe standing here, is it?' a slightly nervous Sir Hugo asked.

'Quite safe, sir,' Walker responded. 'I've been assured that we're well away from Project Starfish over here.'

An ear-splitting klaxon sounded. Three long blasts. Men went scurrying across the airfield's apron and descended into a bunker.

'What's Project Starfish?' I asked, just as several huge explosions smothered my words and shook the ground. Instinctively I threw myself down and covered my head with my hands. Loki and Freya did likewise, while Walker and Sir Hugo didn't budge. For what seemed like ages none of us moved a muscle. Then, realizing I was all right, I spat an annoying blade of wet grass out of my mouth and looked up. Huge fires! Five of them, flames leaping high into the sky beneath billowing columns of black, acrid smoke.

'What the hell ...?' Loki shouted, lifting himself up onto his knees.

'That, everyone, is Starfish,' Sir Hugo announced triumphantly. 'Impressive, eh?'

Scrambling to our feet, we gazed in awe. The fires were spread out, as if at the points of a star. At its centre I saw a concrete structure, and pipes radiating from it towards each blaze.

Walker explained, 'In London this morning you saw for yourselves that the Blitz is still in full swing. Of course, creating decoy airfields is one thing, but fake towns and cities – well, that would be impossible, wouldn't it ...? Or *would* it?' He winked at us.

'My team gave the matter considerable thought,' Sir Hugo continued, removing a large cigar from his coat pocket. He lit up and puffed vigorously. 'The key to it all was the simple observation that the Luftwaffe carry out the majority of their bombing raids at night.' He took the cigar out of his mouth and inspected the glowing tip. 'Each wave of bombers is preceded by a few special aircraft – called Pathfinders – that mark targets with incendiary bombs and flares. The success or failure of the raid depends on how accurately they pinpoint their targets.'

Walker expanded: 'The Luftwaffe developed a secret system they codenamed *Knickebein*, or Crooked Leg, which was based on two separate highly directional radio beams generated from different locations in Europe. The two beams crossed over at the precise position of their intended target. The Pathfinders carried receivers and flew along one beam until they picked up the second. "X" marks the spot, if you like. At that point they released their markers to show all the others where to drop their bombs. But we got lucky. We shot one of them down and were able to recover their equipment and figure it out. We found a way of jamming their system. More recently, however, their targeting has improved. We're pretty sure they've developed something new. We'd dearly love to find out what.'

'Thank you for the lesson, Sergeant,' Sir Hugo butted in. 'As I was saying. The trick we came up with was scarily simple. We decided to mark the targets ourselves ... in the wrong places, of course. Starfish's role is to confuse the enemy. Basically, it comprises large reservoirs of fuel that we can set fire to in a controlled way. It can be turned on and off as and when we like. This one's just a prototype. The operational version is four times bigger. As you can see for yourselves, it creates an impressive show. Imagine it at night! You'd be able to see it for miles. We've built many close to our cities, but not too close - on farmland or wasteland, always in sparsely populated areas. When our radar picks up an incoming raid and we've worked out which city they're heading for, we'll ignite the appropriate Starfish. Enemy pilots will see the flames and assume they represent the markers dropped by their Pathfinders. If they're fooled, they'll drop their munitions somewhere they can't do much harm. Starfish should save many innocent lives.'

Freya brushed damp mud from her skirt. 'You said one of your team had disappeared, sir. Did he have information about the locations for Starfish as well? If he did, it could prove a disaster. Instead of Starfish working as a decoy, it would have the opposite effect.'

Loki frowned. 'How do you figure that out?'

'Freya's right,' I interrupted. 'Think about it. If you were the enemy and you knew the *exact* locations of Starfish, then they'd act as incredibly precise markers, even if they were miles from a city centre. Because if you knew where they were, you could simply make navigational adjustments and drop your bombs in the right place.'

'True, Mr Gunnersen. Hence the locations of Starfish are highly classified,' Sir Hugo responded. 'Each site is heavily restricted and guarded at all times. No unauthorized person is allowed anywhere near them. My man's disappearance has to be investigated urgently. We have to find out if our secrets are safe. Otherwise we'll have to start all over again.'

The fires suddenly stopped. In seconds the smoke had drifted away. We began strolling back towards the car. 'What can you tell us about this man who worked for you, sir?' I asked.

Sir Hugo exhaled a long stream of smoke and replied acidly, 'His name's Claude Chevalier.'

Freya beat me to my next question. 'Any idea where he might be?'

'Yes, miss. France. Paris, I expect.'

Loki stopped dead in his tracks. '*Paris?* How can you be so sure he's left the country?'

'Ah! This is rather awkward,' said Walker, lowering his eyes to the ground. 'A bit embarrassing. All our doing, I'm afraid. Claude's time with Sir Hugo's department was merely a temporary assignment. Claude's actually a member of Special Ops – with our French F-Section based over at Handelbury Manor. He's a man of many talents, is dear old Claude, as well as being somewhat unpredictable – your typical Frenchman, if you ask me. Anyway, once he'd finished working for Sir Hugo, he returned to active duty with us. A week ago we sent him back to France on a routine mission as a courier, only he failed to make his rendezvous. Not only that – despite our best efforts to find him, he appears to have vanished off the face of the earth.'

Loki's shoulders slumped. 'And it's going to be our job to find out what's happened to him, I suppose.'

'Yes. We have to know whether he's got himself into a spot of bother, or whether he's decided the grass is greener on the other side.'

'Do you mean he might have become a double agent?'

'Yes, Finn, it's a possibility we have to consider. Claude knew a great deal, and information is power, or at the very least it's likely to ingratiate you with the enemy. The rewards for sharing such vital intelligence are unimaginable. Of course, it is also possible he's just had his fill of Special Ops work, or snapped under the pressure and decided to forge a new life somewhere with a new identity. He wouldn't be the first to cut loose. As you know, an agent's life isn't exactly an easy one. Some get superstitious and convince themselves that their luck's about to run out. Usually we spot the signs in time: their behaviour becomes erratic, you see. We sit them down and break the news gently to them – that their "career" is over – and then we cart them off to the Forgetting School. Maybe Claude didn't fancy the prospect.'

We'd heard about the so-called *Forgetting School*. Burned-out agents were sent to a remote house in the Scottish Highlands and held there twiddling their thumbs until it was decided they'd forgotten most of what they'd been taught, and that any secrets they knew were no longer of importance. For most it would mean sitting out the rest of the war in isolation – no visitors or outside communication; little different from an internment camp. Everyone in Special Ops dreaded the idea of being sent there.

'And ...?' Freya asked hesitantly. 'Supposing we do find him? Then what?'

Sir Hugo extinguished the stub of his cigar beneath his shoe, grinding it into the ground. 'A decision has been taken at the highest level. Claude Chevalier must either be forced to return to Britain or be silenced ... *permanently*.'

Shocked, Freya swallowed hard. 'Y-y-you mean ... we might have to ... assassinate him?'

'Even if he's simply decided he's had enough of being an agent with Special Ops?' I added in astonishment.

'We can't run the risk.' Walker saw our horror and tried to play down the matter. 'In all probability Claude just needs your help and will be only too glad to return here.' He put on a smile. Loki was shaking his head vehemently. 'This isn't what we joined up to do.' He looked to me for support. 'Is it, Finn? It's one thing taking on the Nazis, but going after one of our own ... that's just plain wrong. You can count me out.'

On previous missions we'd had to take on the enemy and fight our way out of tricky situations, and that had sometimes meant killing them. Loki was right: this was different. I had a nagging question too. 'What makes you think he might have simply taken off? You said he was acting as a courier. What exactly was he carrying?'

'Money, Finn,' Walker replied. 'A whole suitcase full. Two million French francs plus some gold coins. Destined to fund the Resistance in Paris.'

Loki whistled. 'Two million francs. I reckon you've seen the last of Claude.'

Sir Hugo spun round and snapped angrily, 'No, Mr Larson. Dead or alive, I want his head delivered to me on a silver platter. *Understood?*

Shaking their heads, Loki and Freya both backed away. 'No, we simply won't do it.'

The look of fury on Sir Hugo's face grew. He wasn't one to tolerate insubordination. 'Orders are orders!'

Chapter Two Three Blind Mice

One week later.

NICK CARTER UNDERSTOOD A great deal about atmospheric pressure, prevailing winds and precipitation, but he knew absolutely nothing about the troubling incident involving Claude Chevalier and the suitcase bulging with cash. In fact, very few knew about it, and the fewer the better.

Before the war a much younger Carter had been a famous winger with Plymouth Argyle FC nicknamed the Devon Whippet: blindingly quick and with a fabulous left foot. Looking at him now, it was hard to imagine him hurtling down the touchline and flashing in a perfectly angled cross. He had put on weight since a broken leg forced him into early retirement from the game and left him with a pronounced limp. Unfit for active military service, Carter had to make do with a job at the Meteorological Office. Carter being Carter, he took it all extremely seriously. The high-pitched screech as he scraped his chalk across the blackboard set my teeth on edge. All arrows and wavy lines, the weather map he'd drawn for us looked as scary as it was complicated. Turning round, Carter's gaze fell on Loki, Freya and me. He said nothing, but I could sense the questions brewing in his mind: Who on earth are they? What are they doing here?

We were often greeted with puzzled expressions by those lacking the security clearance to be in the know about Special Operations. We'd grown used to all their frowns and stares. The fact that we were present, sitting in the same room, listening to their classified briefings, meant we had to be important, but most knew better than to enquire as to our role in this hellish war. Only a discreet handful of men and women, a very select few, knew of our existence and what we'd been trained to do. In fact, the reaction of men like Carter explained why we were there; why we were part of an organization designated Most Secret. The enemy would think the same as they did: surely they're too young to be taken seriously – hardly worth bothering about – hardly likely to be enemy spies. And so they'd be deceived too; *hopefully*. We were secret agents. Our purpose? To give Herr Hitler's men as much aggro as possible.

'Make it snappy, Mr Carter. We haven't got all night,' grumbled Brigadier Devlin, fidgeting in his seat and repeatedly glancing at his watch.

'First really bad storm of the winter, sir,' Carter began, stepping back to admire his handiwork. 'All flights should be grounded until further notice. We're predicting wind speeds of sixty miles per hour, gusts up to eighty. Only a complete idiot would attempt a dash across the Channel.' His gaze drifted pointedly in the direction of Captain Nils Jacobsen.

Nils was sitting in front of me, two rows from the back. Ignoring Carter's remark, he continued scribbling notes on a pad resting on his left knee. I leaned forward to look over his shoulder and saw he'd begun calculating his aircraft's range based on a full load and stiff headwind. A pilot with the clandestine Moon Squadron – set up to get agents in and out of enemy territory fast and with the minimum of fuss – it was Nils's job to fly the three of us into France. From his frequent mutterings I could tell he hardly relished the prospect.

Brigadier Devlin stood up from the front row of collapsible wooden chairs. He interrupted Carter with a loud, disdainful grunt, making no attempt to conceal his growing irritation. 'Yes, yes, all right, thank you, Mr Carter, we get the message. Unfortunately, circumstances demand otherwise. What Captain Jacobsen requires from you is advice regarding the safest way to fly, and not your opinion as to his sanity.'

Carter flung down his chalk and pressed a finger against the blackboard. 'See these tightly packed isobars, sir? See the way the barometric pressure's falling through the floor? A deep depression is moving through the English Channel. The cloud base is so low it'll test the skills of even the most experienced pilot. You'll be flying through the worst of it blind, and odds on you'll fail to spot your landing site. To risk going in is foolhardy in the extreme. I implore you to wait at least another forty-eight hours. By then the worst of it should be heading into the Baltic. Forty-eight hours, sir. That's all. Surely ...'

The brigadier shook his head. Carter threw up his arms in despair. 'Then on your own heads be it. I shall be making an official complaint to the Air Ministry.'

The brigadier snorted. 'Do as you see fit.'

I thought he was going to add *for all the difference it'll make*, but he didn't.

'Then I've nothing more to add.' Carter began gathering up all his papers and stuffing them angrily into his bag. I had the feeling he'd assumed – quite wrongly, of course – that his warning would be heeded, that the war would be temporarily halted on his command, as if he were a referee in a Cup tie and had blown his whistle to abandon the match. The Devon Whippet had just learned an important lesson: war doesn't get postponed just because of a waterlogged pitch.

By now it was ten o'clock in the evening, and we were huddled inside a small briefing hut next to the tangled spirals of rusting barbed wire that comprised the perimeter fence to RAF Tangmere, situated a stone's throw from the Sussex coast. The air smelled earthy and dank, like mushroom compost, and I noticed the ceiling was dotted with splodges of creeping black mould. Lacking any form of heating, the place was freezing. Overcoats and tightly knotted scarves were the order of the day, worn over thick sweaters and two pairs of socks. We could hear the wind's bluster outside, and every couple of minutes an especially violent gust drove a mix of rain and hail hard against the windows as if someone had thrown a handful of dry semolina at it for a dare. It hammered down on the corrugated tin roof too, sounding like sacks of spuds being emptied onto our heads.

No doubt the deafening racket made Carter feel vindicated. Looking Nils in the eye, he advised sternly, 'Fly as low as you dare, Captain, and pray that your guardian angel will be looking out for you.' Carter wanted the last word.

The brigadier removed his favourite smouldering briar from his lips, and harrumphed. 'Right, Mr Carter, if you've quite finished ...' He gestured towards the door with his cane. 'You're dismissed.'

The muscles in Carter's face twitched as he snapped shut the catches on his bag, mumbled something about a *ruddy waste of time* and limped towards the door. Grabbing hold of the handle, he hesitated, taking a moment to scrutinize Loki, Freya and me. The three of us were sitting in the back row and hadn't uttered a word since entering the hut. He opened his mouth as if about to speak, then changed his mind, and instead tutted while shaking his head. I could imagine his thoughts: utter foolishness, reckless, *insane*. Then his expression darkened: *lambs to the slaughter*.

Carter departed, slamming the hut door behind him. I leaned forward and tapped Nils on the shoulder. 'If the Devon Whippet's right, shouldn't we heed his advice? I mean, if we can't spot the landing lights, we'll have to turn round and come back. That's crazy.'