

THERE IS A TRAITOR WITHIN . . .



WOLF SQUADRON

CRAIG SIMPSON

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About the Book

We were at the point of no return.

This was it. Next stop enemy territory.

If we got caught, torture and a firing squad would be our reward. The red lamp went out and the green one came on. For a few seconds I could still see red before my eyes. I blinked frantically and then looked forward. Loki had already exited the plane and Freya was disappearing too.

'Action stations! Go, go, go!' Smithy shouted. He waved me forward. I sank onto my hands and knees and scrambled to the edge of the hatch. I slipped my legs out, sat on the edge and glanced up at Smithy. 'Good luck, Finn. Stay safe. Go, go go!'



WOLF SQUADRON
CRAIG SIMPSON

RHCP DIGITAL

For the many brave Dutch men and women who, like Hermine (Miep) Gies, ¹ risked their lives to help others who were forced into hiding or desperate to escape.

¹ Miep Gies (1909-2010) was among those who helped Anne Frank's family while they were hiding in the secret annexe in Nazi-occupied Amsterdam, and who 'rescued' Anne's diary following the raid by the Gestapo in August 1944. In the post-war years she came to be seen as symbolic of those who act selflessly in order to help others in times of war and oppression.

MOST SECRET

It is early summer 1941 and Nazi Germany has a firm grasp over much of Europe. Finn Gunnerson and best friends, Loki Larson and Freya Haukelid, have managed to escape their native Norway and fly to Britain in order to deliver vital information. Their astonishing courage has not gone unnoticed. An enigmatic man known only as X has recruited them 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, to create networks of agents in occupied countries, and to help coordinate local Resistance groups in the fight against Nazi oppression and tyranny. It is extremely hazardous work.

Finn, Loki and Freya are now fully trained secret agents. With their first mission into France successfully completed they are ready for action once again.

This story is inspired by real events.

Special Operations Personnel Files

MOST SECRET

NAME: Finn Gunnersen

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.



(File note dated June 1941

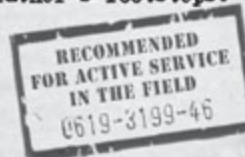
Addendum: father officially reclassified as 'missing, presumed dead', based on advice received from Air Ministry.

Signed - Brigadier Devlin, Commanding Officer, Mulberry House - cross reference to file AirPMIA4)

ASSESSMENT: Basic training and assessment carried out at Mulberry House under Brigadier Devlin. Key observations: outwardly unremarkable. Taught to fly by father and keen to obtain his official 'wings'. 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 realizes. Keen to follow in father's footsteps.

COMPLETED MISSIONS:

Operation Death Ray (France)



Special Operations Personnel Files

MOST SECRET

NAME: Loki Larson

AGE: 16

BACKGROUND: Born

Trondheim, Norway. Father commercial pilot and member of local Norwegian Resistance. Escaped from occupied Norway along with Mr Gunnerson.



ASSESSMENT: Basic

training and assessment carried out at Mulberry House under Brigadier Devlin. Key observations: 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. Lifelong friend of Mr Gunnerson and close to Miss Haukelid. All function well as a team.

COMPLETED MISSIONS: Operation Death Ray (France)



Special Operations Personnel Files

MOST SECRET

NAME: Freya Haukelid

AGE: 16

BACKGROUND: Born in remote part of Norway. Father arrested for actively resisting Nazi occupation. Mother deceased.



(File note dated January 1941

Addendum: father officially reclassified as 'deceased', based on intelligence received from agents located in Norway. Did not survive wounds received during arrest.

Signed - Brigadier Devlin, Commanding Officer, Mulberry House)

ASSESSMENT: Basic training and assessment carried out at Mulberry House under Brigadier Devlin. Key observations: 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 proved herself during first active mission. Survived interrogation by Gestapo during capture (rescued by Messrs Gummersen and Larson).

COMPLETED MISSIONS:

Operation Death Ray (France)

RECOMMENDED
FOR ACTIVE SERVICE
AS W/T OPERATOR
6619-7839-25

Special Operations Personnel Files

MOST SECRET

NAME: Marieke Maartens

AGE: 15

BACKGROUND: Born

Scheveningen, The Hague,
Holland. Mother and father
drowned during floods in
Holland in 1937. Came to
England before outbreak of
war and lived with
grandparents near Oxford.

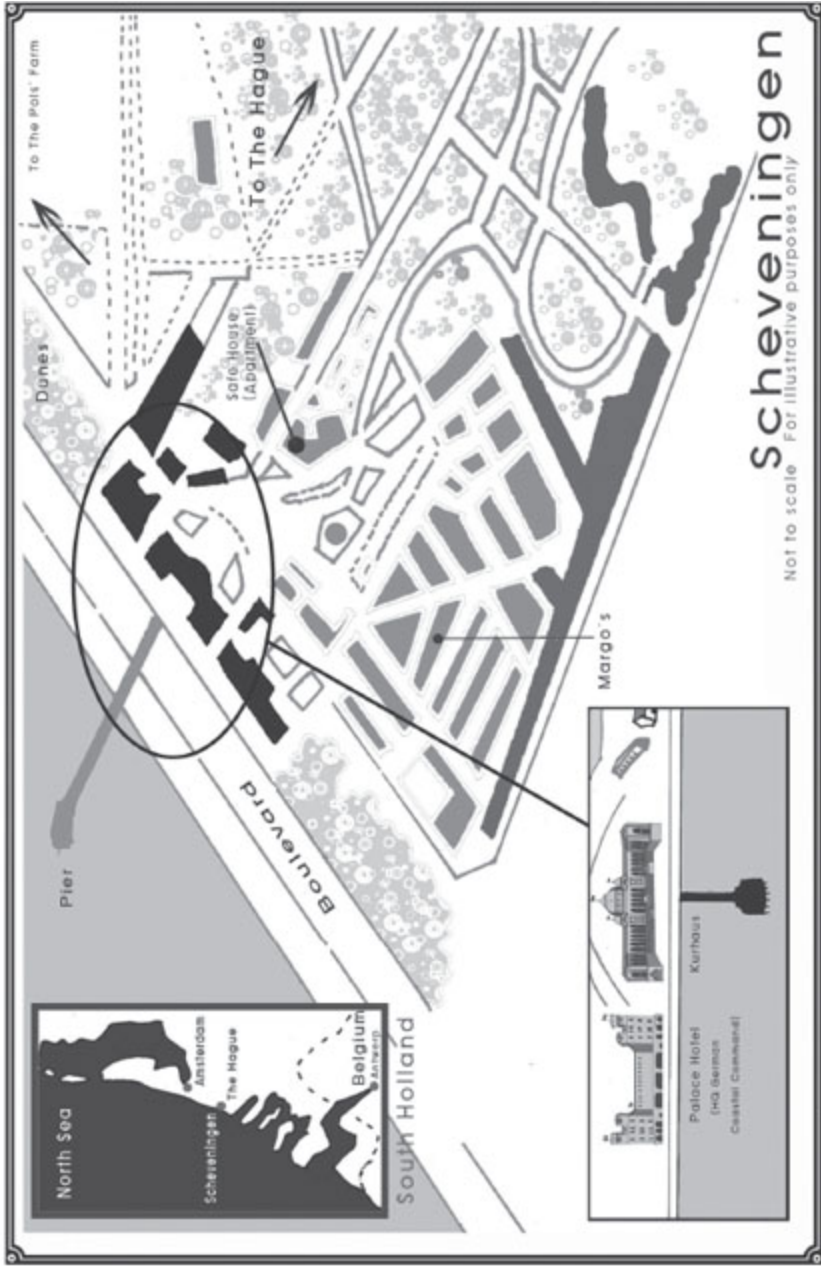
Has an older brother, Karel Maartens,
whereabouts and status unknown -
presumed to be still in Holland. Recruited to
Special Operations in November 1940.



ASSESSMENT: Basic training and assessment
carried out at Dovecote (Dutch Section) under
Major Gerrit. Key observations: English is
fluent, and coding and wireless skills have
reached adequate speed and accuracy. Excellent
organizational and communication skills. Prone
to let her emotions show but resilient. Below
average marksmanship - better in a leading or
co-ordinating role. Not short on courage.

Ready for active service.





Have you ever wished for the seemingly impossible? Ever wanted something so much that it hurts inside, maybe even keeps you awake at night? I have, and it nearly got me killed. All it took was a glimmer of hope. It grew so powerful, so all-consuming, that I believed I could succeed against impossible odds. For once, throwing caution to the wind seemed best. Others called it reckless.

A courageous young Dutch girl once said to me that a life without hopes and dreams is no life at all. They were her final words to me. Her name was Marieke. Looking back, I think she was right.

Finn Gunnensen,
June 1941

Chapter One

The Messenger

Mulberry House, Special Operations
Training School, May 1941.

'STOP IT! LEAVE him be, you two. Can't you see you're frightening him?' Freya reached out and grasped my arm.

The boy was wrapped in grey woollen blankets and rocked back and forth on the edge of the brown leather sofa. His jet-black hair was matted and filthy, and his strange-looking clothes stank as if he'd been living in them for weeks. I could see that he was sick. His tortured breathing sounded strange, the short shallow gasps a bit like stifled hiccups. Loki and I stood barely six feet in front of him and bombarded him with questions. 'What's your name? Where are you from? What on earth happened to you?' His bewildered stare went right through us as if we weren't there. With Freya stepping in, Loki hesitated and we exchanged puzzled glances.

Dipping his head, our visitor began to mumble, softly at first but then with increasing volume and urgency. Loki pulled me to one side. 'Damn it, Finn, I can't understand a word he's saying. Sounds like Dutch to me.'

'Let's try out our German. Maybe that'll work.'

We'd learned to speak some German back home in Norway after the Nazis invaded our country, but on this

occasion trying it out backfired. I'd barely uttered a word before a renewed look of terror appeared on the boy's face. He scrambled to the far end of the sofa, as far away from me as he could get, pressing himself into the leather and drawing his knees tightly up to his chin. Trembling, he suddenly looked me in the eye and shrieked, '*Asperge!*' so loudly it seemed to pierce the air like a rapier. Had the boy gone completely mad?

'Enough, Finn!' Freya shook her head at me in exasperation. Cautiously she stepped forward, avoiding any sudden movements, as if she were closing in on some cornered, wounded creature, all quivers and pounding heartbeat. 'What he needs right now is to know he's safe, that he's reached sanctuary. If we can get him to realize he's among friends he might calm down. We might even get some sense out of him.'

He watched her nervously, expectantly, ready to lash out. She thought better of it and backed away.

The arrival of our unexpected guest at Mulberry House had been announced in a telephone call earlier that evening, after which all hell had broken loose. Judging from the extremely alarmed expressions on our instructors' faces as they rushed to and fro gathering up files, maps and intelligence reports, something calamitous had occurred. By the time the car drew up outside and a stern-faced redcap - a military policeman - hammered a fist on the front door, the mayhem had been replaced by an uneasy calm that pervaded Mulberry like the pungent smell of boiled cabbage. Our chief instructor, Sergeant Walker, signed the policeman's clipboard, took delivery of the boy and ushered him into the lounge.

As usual, information was dished out by our superiors on a strictly need-to-know basis, and so we had no idea what on earth was unfolding. But whatever it was, it had to be big, as visitors were rare at Mulberry House - officially we didn't exist; Special Operations didn't exist! It was all top secret,

very *hush-hush*. However, when Sergeant Walker poked his head round the lounge door I had the feeling all that was about to change.

'The doc is on his way.' The sergeant desperately tried to sound upbeat but he didn't fool me. 'Soon get you sorted, lad, don't you worry. You're as safe as houses now. I've asked Mrs Saunders to make you a nice hot mug of cocoa.' Edging back into the hallway, Walker caught my eye and mouthed the word *Trouble*.

What trouble? I mouthed back.

He didn't elaborate. Instead, jabbing a thumb over his shoulder, he said bluntly, 'The brigadier wants to see you three in his office. Now!'

Shrouded in a dense cloud of sweet pipe smoke, the brigadier remained seated behind his desk, his telephone glued to his ear. He looked up, waved us in and beckoned for us all to sit down. 'I share the prime minister's concerns, sir,' he said gravely to whoever was on the other end of the line. 'No, I can't think of any other way of getting at the truth . . . Uh-huh . . . Of course I appreciate that my suggestion is unorthodox, sir, but desperate times call for desperate measures . . . It is indeed a delicate matter and warrants the utmost secrecy . . . I agree the boy should remain here for now. A wise move given the circumstances . . . My team will deal with it, sir. You can rely on us. Thank you for giving me the green light. I've codenamed the mission Operation Salesman. I'll set the wheels in motion. Rest assured we'll get to the bottom of it all.'

The fiery-cheeked Brigadier Devlin was our commanding officer at Mulberry House. He was old-school army, stiff upper-lipped, and a fully paid-up member of the *charge the bastards with your bayonets fixed* brigade, stemming from his torrid time in the trenches of Ypres during the Great War. Now in his late fifties and in possession of a gammy leg filled with shrapnel that gave him hell whenever it turned

cold, he had to be content sitting behind a desk and overseeing the training of those who'd do the Boche-bashing this time round on his behalf. We'd already learned that he was a shrewd man, capable of great warmth and generosity as well as a ruthlessness that made you quake in your boots. Such men shine brightly when their country goes to war. Carefully replacing the telephone receiver back into its cradle, he removed his favourite briar from between his teeth and tapped out the burned ash into an overflowing ashtray. 'So, how is our guest?' he enquired, lifting his watery gaze in Walker's direction.

'A few cracked ribs and suffering from exposure, I'd say, sir. Doctor's on his way.'

'I see.' Turning his attention to us, the brigadier gave a heavy sigh. 'Time to fill you in. According to his papers, the lad's name is Jan Keppel and he's fourteen years old.'

The name Keppel instantly struck a chord. While I tried to remember why, the brigadier continued, 'Having escaped from Holland, he was picked up at daybreak this morning in a small dinghy close to the beach at a place in Essex called Frinton-on-Sea. Poor lad's been through the wringer. Unsurprisingly, Frinton's Home Guard couldn't get much sense out of him. Delirious from his injuries, I expect. Anyway, all he kept muttering was a single word, over and over again: *asperge*.'

Loki's expression hardened. 'We heard him shout that word just now. What does it mean?'

'It's Dutch for "asparagus", Mr Larson. Our Dutch section has a network of agents in Holland. The circuit is codenamed Asparagus.'

Walker chipped in, 'It's our biggest operation. Our agents work alongside the Dutch Resistance, organizing parachute drops, sabotage raids and, most importantly of all, escape routes for aircrews shot down over enemy territory. Those lucky enough to have time to bale out of their aircraft and avoid capture the moment they hit the ground often find

their way into the arms of partisans willing to hide them. Naturally it's our duty to try and bring them back home. Live to fight another day and all that. With Bomber Command's continuing heavy losses, the numbers are appallingly high, so the initiative is being given the highest priority.'

The brigadier finished up by adding, 'Various escape routes have been established across Europe. The Holland route is the most advanced. We've already had a couple of major successes. It's an important morale booster.'

The name Keppel continued to preoccupy my thoughts. During combined training sessions with the Dutch section of Special Ops, I was sure I'd met someone called Keppel. But it definitely wasn't Jan. I spotted his papers on the brigadier's desk and asked if I might have a look. The brigadier nodded. Jan's photograph was glued to the front, and all the official Dutch and Nazi stamps appeared correct and up to date - we'd studied them during lessons on forgery and I'd even had a go at making a stamp of an eagle by carving a piece of woodblock. On the inside Jan's name was followed by his date of birth, and above a slightly smudged thumbprint was a list of dates and addresses, the most recent being a place called Scheveningen. Loki was itching for a peek so I handed it to him.

'Scheveningen! I've got an aunt who lives on a farm not far from there. She left Norway when she married her Dutch husband,' he declared with a mix of surprise and delight. 'It's just outside The Hague, a few miles from the coast. I spent a summer there.'

Only half listening, I suddenly remembered where I'd heard the name. '*Bram* Keppel!' I blurted, thinking aloud. 'We trained with him a couple of times. He's with Major Gerrit's lot over at Dovecote.'

Teams of agents of different nationalities were often based at separate houses in the New Forest. Dovecote was a huge country pile hidden in woods about three miles from

Mulberry and was used exclusively by the Dutch. Loki stared at me blankly.

'You remember. Tall boy, black hair. Crack shot. Jan could be his younger brother.' I looked to the brigadier. 'Am I right? Is he one of us too?'

The brigadier shook his head. 'Although Jan *is* Bram's brother, he's not one of us, Mr Gunnensen. He's an innocent civilian who's had the misfortune to get caught up in an ungodly mess.'

'Bram Keppel is, or at least *was*, the leader of Asparagus,' Walker informed me soberly. 'He was the first to be sent back into Holland.'

Fearing the worst, I asked, '*Was?*'

'Is or was, we simply don't know. That's the nightmare facing us.' The brigadier threw up his hands in exasperation. 'According to Jan his brother was arrested on the streets of The Hague three weeks ago - along with the whole damn Asparagus circuit, by the sound of it. Jan's convinced they must've been betrayed. The lad managed to get away by the skin of his teeth and escaped in order to warn us. If he's to be believed, we've lost all our agents, and months of hard work have been for nothing.' Slumping deep into the leather of his chair, he gripped the arms tightly as if he shared the pain of those captured.

Freya reached out and took Jan's papers from Loki. 'It sounds like you doubt his story, sir.'

The brigadier stabbed his pipe at wads of reports spread out on his desk. 'Have a gander at those. They're decoded messages, supposedly from Bram and his fellow wireless operators. Notice anything unusual?'

We each grabbed one. Mine looked routine - a request for more supplies to be dropped. Freya sat bolt upright and let out a gasp. 'Oh my, I see what you mean.' She pointed to the date and time of the transmission. 'This was sent only two days ago.'

I inspected mine again - it had been sent just one week previously. The penny dropped. If Bram had been arrested three weeks ago, then no way could the messages have been freely sent by him. I swallowed hard as my brain went into overdrive and I realized the terrible truth. 'Hell, this must mean the Germans have our codes and are impersonating our agents.'

'Or maybe German Intelligence is forcing Bram and the others to transmit with a gun to their heads, Finn,' Loki added sharply.

As I imagined the horrors our fellow agents might be experiencing at the hands of the infamous Gestapo, the brigadier bit hard on the stem of his pipe. 'You may be right, Mr Larson.'

Freya drew breath. 'But,' she said hesitatingly, 'it just doesn't add up . . .'

Loki cast down his message in disgust. 'Well, I think they must've been captured, just like Jan says. To doubt his story would be ridiculous. I mean, who else could he be? He's hardly likely to be a Nazi stooge or an enemy agent sent to feed us false intelligence.' He scarcely hid his sarcasm.

Freya responded quickly. 'Yes, but you know the drill. If we are caught and forced to transmit messages by the enemy, we deliberately leave out our security checks.'

She was right. Agents' messages were encrypted and then sent using Morse code. Crucially, as well as identifying themselves by their codename, agents routinely included deliberate errors or additional phrases in their messages - agreed with headquarters in advance - so that HQ could be certain it was them tapping away on the Morse key. Leaving them out or changing them automatically raised the alarm. It was standard procedure, drummed into our brains during endless hours of mind-numbing practice.

The brigadier's expression darkened. 'Quite so, Miss Haukelid. Unfortunately, according to Major Gerrit all his agents' transmissions have been normal. Nothing untoward.'

That's the puzzle, you see. On the one hand everything appears tickety-boo, and yet, on the other, we have Jan's distressing story.'

Loki glanced up at the ceiling and whistled.

'It gets worse,' Walker grumbled. He was leaning up against a set of filing cabinets and toying with a paper knife in a manner that suggested he'd love to have the chance to use it in anger. 'There are presently airmen waiting to get the hell out of Holland. It's critical we get them out as soon as possible. Unless, that is, they've been rounded up by the enemy as well.'

The brigadier rose from his chair and paced the room, flexing his knee and rubbing life back into his numb thigh. Irritably, he cursed both his discomfort and our predicament. 'It's a bad business all right. If Jan Keppel's correct, then the whole of Special Ops may have been compromised. We're supposed to be "Most Secret", for God's sake!'

'What are you going to do now, sir? Pull the plug on the whole operation?' Loki asked.

Freya's hand shot up. 'Surely you first need a way to find out the truth, one way or the other. Can't the local Dutch Resistance confirm the situation?'

'Afraid not,' Walker replied. 'Too risky. In the current circumstances we don't know who we can trust. We're totally blind to what's happening over there.'

The brigadier spun on his heels to face us. 'Miss Haukelid is quite right, though. All our efforts must be directed to establishing whether Asparagus really has been compromised or not. However, we mustn't do anything that might allow the enemy to get wind of our suspicions. If Jan's right and old Fritz gets a sniff that we've rumbled him, the consequences could be dire. Being of no further use, they'd have no reason to keep Bram and the others alive. Assuming, of course, they're still breathing. However, I

believe there is a way, a cunning deception that might just work.'

'What kind of deception?' Loki asked.

The brigadier settled gingerly back into his chair. Searching the tabletop, he located a piece of paper and held it up. 'This latest message requests that we parachute in an additional agent. So that's exactly what I intend to do. I'm going to give them what they want: another agent, another wireless transmitter and another code book.'

'Sounds like a suicide mission to me,' Freya muttered under her breath.

'Quite right, Miss Haukelid. That's exactly what it is! That was X on the phone just now. After some persuasion he's given me the green light.'

Stunned silence filled the room. Had the brigadier gone doolally? I assumed not, as X had approved the scheme. X was in overall charge of Special Ops and reported directly to Britain's prime minister, Winston Churchill. Although we'd met him a few times, X's real identity was a closely guarded secret. As the brigadier's intentions sank in, a wave of confusion engulfed me. Scratching my head, I said, 'I don't get it, sir. What's the point of sending in another agent if there's every chance he'll be captured as soon as he arrives?'

A wry smile formed on the brigadier's lips. 'That's why we need to locate a rather special volunteer, Mr Gunnensen; someone willing to make an exceptional sacrifice, *someone expendable!* X wishes the matter to be handled entirely by our section, and so, Finn and Loki, you two will assist with the parachute drop. The need for your extra muscle will become apparent in due course. Tomorrow morning you'll receive a full briefing on Operation Salesman, and afterwards you must be ready to move at a moment's notice. Timing will be everything.'

Contemplating the idea of someone making an exceptional sacrifice, and figuring the brigadier probably

meant the *ultimate* sacrifice, I exchanged fretful glances with Loki. Neither of us liked the sound of it.

Freya, meanwhile, struck me as being deeply puzzled by something. Not one to hold back, she asked, 'Why was Jan brought *here*, sir? Why wasn't he taken to Dovecote? That's where the Dutch are based. All this is surely Major Gerrit's problem to sort out. Why are we getting involved?'

The brigadier flashed Walker the kind of look that told me he'd been hoping to avoid such questions. Walker thought for a moment before offering an explanation of sorts. 'Jan's story would demolish the morale of Dutch agents based at Dovecote, miss, especially those next in line for returning home. They'd fear they might be parachuting straight into the arms of the enemy. Best the boy remains here for now.'

The brigadier seemed mighty relieved by the sergeant's answer. It was as if it had dug him out of a deep hole and avoided the need to reveal other reasons - maybe the *real* reasons - for our involvement and why Jan Keppel had been brought to Mulberry. Something else troubled me too. Where was Major Gerrit? Why wasn't he here, involved in our discussions about the fate of his team? I raised the point.

The brigadier squirmed and refused to look me in the eye. Without warning Walker sprang to his feet. 'Ah, I can hear a car, sir. Must be the doctor.'

We were dismissed. Our meeting was over, and although my question remained unanswered I'd read their body language. Major Gerrit's absence and the fact that Jan had *not* been taken to Dovecote were far more important than they were letting on. But why?

Chapter Two

You Only Die Twice

EMERGING FROM THE airfield's vast hangar, I grabbed the handles of the wheelchair and began pushing it across the grass. A week had passed since Jan Keppel's arrival and it was time to get some answers. The evening breeze was warm and brushed gently against my cheeks as I contemplated our peculiar mission.

On the far side of the airfield a lone Whitley bomber was waiting for us, her twin Tiger engines idling, the hot exhaust gases making the evening air shimmer, her de Havilland propellers spinning in a whining blur. Silhouetted against a fiery red sunset, she was an odd-looking beast, all straight lines, box-like, her ugly bulbous nose housing her forward guns. She was like some hideous black insect, the sort that could give you a nasty bite.

Loki jogged to catch me up, the carefully packed parachute slung over his shoulder and rhythmically slapping against his back. 'I can't believe we're part of all this, Finn. It doesn't feel right. I mean . . . *really* not right.' He gazed down at the man in the wheelchair and shook his head.

'Just be grateful it's not you sitting in this thing,' I replied. And I meant it.

According to the fake identity papers tucked inside his jacket, our 'volunteer' in the wheelchair was one Paul van Beek, a travelling shoe salesman from Leiden, a small Dutch town midway between Amsterdam and The Hague. That

was just part of his cover. He was no more Dutch than Loki or me. His real name was Private Clive Digby and he was as British as fish and chips.

I looked at the plane ahead of us again. With a wingspan of eighty-four feet, the Whitley normally carried a pretty hefty bomb load. That night, however, it was just Loki and me, Digby, and the Whitley's flight crew who'd be heading out across the North Sea.

Brigadier Devlin and Sergeant Walker had come to see us off. Leaning heavily on his steel-tipped walking cane, the brigadier inspected his watch and bellowed at us to get a move on. The worry and strain showed on his face and the sight hardly filled me with confidence. I gave the wheelchair one final shove and arrived next to the Whitley's fuselage, the backdraught from the propellers wildly scrambling my hair amid the sharp stink of burned kerosene and hot oil.

'Digby's supply canister is already on board,' Walker informed us, shouting over the deafening din of the engines. Turning, he waved energetically at someone in the cockpit to attract their attention and then, cupping his hands about his mouth, yelled, 'You can open them now.'

Clunks and whirs of the hydraulics operating the doors to the aircraft's bomb compartment struck up, and the gaping hole in the bird's belly slowly revealed itself. 'Manoeuvre the wheelchair underneath, Finn, and then climb inside. Loki and I will lift Digby up.'

Three minutes later, and volunteer Special Ops agent Digby was safely inside the plane. Walker and the brigadier wished us luck and retreated a safe distance across the airfield, Walker dragging the empty wheelchair behind him. The bomb doors swung shut and clicked into their locked positions.

The inside of the fuselage looked like a giant empty soup tin. To minimize weight it had been stripped of anything that might make our flight comfortable. As we settled down onto the hard metal walkway, our pilot, Captain Nils Jacobsen,

ventured back from his seat in the cockpit. Smiling, he waved a hello. 'Everything all right, lads?'

We grumbled but nodded. Nils was a good friend, and with him at the controls I felt in safe hands. A Norwegian like us, he'd flown Spitfires alongside my father in the Battle of Britain the previous summer and had been called upon to chaperone us during our initial training in Special Ops. More recently transferred to the Moon Squadron, he was now responsible for ferrying agents in and out of Europe in the dead of night.

Mopping perspiration from his shiny brow, Nils hammered a fist against the airframe. 'This old crate isn't in the best shape but it's all they had at such short notice. It'll do the job though.' Bending down to get a better look at Digby, a shadow of disgust passed over his face. 'So this is the poor sod, is it?' He patted him lightly on the shoulder. 'Well, good luck, old boy!'

Digby couldn't reply because he'd already been dead for some hours.

Instinctively, Nils wiped the hand he'd used to pat Digby's shoulder on his tunic. 'Where on earth did they find him?'

'Salisbury Plain,' Loki replied. 'Apparently he bought it yesterday afternoon in a freak accident during training on an assault course. Broke his neck in two places. Died instantly. Just what the brigadier was waiting for. He commandeered the body and had him driven straight to the airfield in total secrecy.'

Nils shook his head in revulsion. 'Is there no limit to the depths people will stoop to? I mean, I know this war is vile, no holds barred, and all that, but . . . Christ! Anyway, what will dropping a corpse over enemy territory achieve?'

Nils's orders were simple. Having been given the map coordinates for Digby's drop, he had to fly us in and fly us out and try not to get shot down. He knew little regarding the background or purpose of Operation Salesman and so his distaste was understandable. I wanted to explain that

Digby's injuries were entirely consistent with those a parachutist might experience should their silk canopy fail to open properly, that – sickeningly – it was this fact that made him the perfect volunteer for the brigadier's clever deception. However, Loki and I had been instructed to say nothing, and so reluctantly we kept our mouths shut.

Nils accepted our silence as being our sworn duty and didn't press the matter. Straightening up, he pointed to an instrument panel. 'Put on your helmets and hook up the intercoms to this unit. I'll keep you informed of our position and let you know when we approach the drop zone.' He gestured towards two naked bulbs. 'Standard procedure, lads. When the red light comes on, get Digby and his supply canister into position for the drop. He goes out through that hatch in the floor forward of the bomb doors. I'll switch to the green light when we're over the DZ. For God's sake remember to hook both static lines above your heads. Otherwise the parachutes won't open. Any questions?'

We shook our heads. Nils turned towards the cockpit but then hesitated. Reaching out, he placed a hand firmly on my shoulder. I sensed his awkwardness, especially when he peered at me with the oddest of expressions and I noticed a slight tremble on his lips. 'Listen, Finn – because of reports of enemy night patrols, our route takes us on quite a detour. We'll be flying over the spot where your father was shot down. I wasn't sure if it was wise to tell you. It's just that . . . well . . . I thought you might want to take a look. It'll probably be dark by the time we get there but you'll get a sense of where it happened.'

He'd taken me completely by surprise. It was like a punch to the face, arriving from nowhere, without warning, and it rocked me. As well as being startled, I couldn't suppress a huge lump in my throat. It almost choked me and snatched my breath away. Unable to speak, I could only offer a faint nod.