CAUGHT IN THE CROSSFIRE

by Norsebard
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DISCLAIMERS:

This World War II drama belongs in the Uber category. All characters are created by me, though some of them may remind you of someone.

Although this is an amalgamation of several true stories, certain characters and events have been dramatized and composite characters have been used. All character names - save for a few historical figures - have been created for this story to hide the identity of the real people involved.

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This story depicts a loving relationship between consenting adult women. If such a story frightens you, you better click on the X in the top-right corner and find something else to read.

This story contains some profanity. Readers who are easily offended by bad language may wish to read something other than this story.

This story contains war-type violence and occasional brutality, some of which is directed at women. Readers who are sensitive to such content may wish to read something other than this story.

NOTES FROM THE AUTHOR:

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Thank you for your help, Phineas Redux and Boba71 *Flower*

As usual, I'd like to say a great, big THANK YOU to my mates at AUSXIP Talking Xena, especially to the gals and guys in Subtext Central. I really appreciate your support - Thanks, everybody! :D

Description: On March 21st 1945, history records that the Royal Air Force conducted a low-level bombing raid against the Gestapo headquarters in Copenhagen, Denmark. What history fails to record are the names of the brave women in the resistance movement who gathered the intelligence and who risked their lives going up against the Nazi occupation forces day-in, day-out for several years. This is a story of two of those women, Henriette Brandt and Vera Holgersen.
PROLOGUE

On April 9th, 1940, Denmark was occupied by Nazi Germany. Air, sea and land-based troops fell over the small country and swept all opposition aside in a matter of hours. Although it was spared the destruction that befell so many of the other European nations, it was a bitter pill to swallow for the Danes who had always taken pride in their independence.

For two years, a somewhat peaceful co-existence was upheld, but when the tide of war started to change in 1942, the Danes grew bolder and began to create small resistance groups that were used to perform bee-sting operations against the German troops and the local collaborators.

As the fortunes of war worsened for the Nazi forces throughout Europe in 1943, the small resistance groups received help from the SOE, the Special Operations Executive based in the United Kingdom. Some of these resistance groups began to organize large-scale acts of sabotage, like bombings of factories that were controlled by the Nazis or Danish collaborators, or assassinations of known or suspected informants working for the Germans.

Matters came to a head in August 1943 when a general strike swept through the land. In all major cities, Danish workers put down their tools and refused to work for the Nazi occupation forces. The German National Command, led by Reich plenipotentiary and General der SS Werner Best, declared martial law which led to the dissolving of parliament.

In the weeks following the declaration of martial law, the Nazi terror regime hunted down the Jewish community in Denmark like their European relatives had been half a decade earlier. Through good fortune - and the help of a German diplomat - the majority of the Danish Jews were saved by finding passage to nearby neutral Sweden, but some weren't as lucky and were deported to the concentration camps in Germany and Poland.

All this led to an escalation in the acts of sabotage. Ultimately the largest attack on German interests in Denmark, the bombing of the Rifle Syndicate - an arms factory - was carried out two weeks after D-Day in June 1944 by intrepid members of a single resistance group.

As revenge for the many acts of sabotage, a large unit of uniformed Danish collaborators known as the Schalburg Corps performed assassinations of people suspected of being in the resistance movement, and brutal tit-for-tat bombings against civilian targets that were meant to create fear among the population - these acts of terrorism came to be known as 'Schalburgtage.'

Amidst unprecedented aggression from the Nazi soldiers, officers of the regular Danish police forces were arrested on September 19th, 1944, and sent to concentration camps in Denmark and Germany. This operation opened a barn door for the HIPO Corps - short for auxiliary police, i.e. uniformed Danish collaborators - that assumed control over most of the major cities and acted as the regime's homegrown, thuggish force against the population.

In late 1944 going into 1945, the Nazi secret police, the Gestapo, along with uniformed police units from the German SD - the state security forces - and scores of sympathizers and informants had gathered a huge archive of records listing thousands of Danish citizens who were suspected of various crimes against the Fatherland.

The archives were located in the former offices of Royal Dutch Shell that had been commandeered at the start of the war. If the archives could be destroyed, it would mean the Gestapo and the auxiliary police would lose the ability to wage war effectively against the resistance movement.

The resistance movement drew several plans for an air raid on the Shell House and sent them to their British contacts, but all were rejected by the Royal Air Force - that is, all but one...

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CHAPTER 1

Monday, February 19th, 1945.

The tram that brought the twenty-seven year old Henriette Brandt home from work creaked and groaned as it drove down Gammel Kongevej. Occasionally, the trolley pole above the car bucked or sent out a few sparks, but that wasn't out of the ordinary.

She was fifteen minutes late compared to when she usually got off from work, and as a result, the tram was far more crowded than she preferred. No seats were available, so she held onto one of the leather straps halfway down the first of the two cars.

The boulevard the tram drove on was far less congested than it had been before the war. Then, it would have been suicidal to even contemplate crossing it on foot, but now, she could count the number of motorized vehicles they went past on one hand - five years of fuel rationing had left a mark.

In their place had come hundreds if not thousands of bicycles that occupied the deserted streets and boulevards; many of which drove reasonably, but some appeared to have left their brains at home.

Just as Henriette moved her hand away from the leather strap to look at her wristwatch, the tram car bucked in the tracks which nearly made her lose her footing. As it was, she bumped against a man in a dark, woolly coat who was sitting right next to where she had been standing. "Oh, I'm terribly sorry, Sir," she said and offered the man an apologetic smile, but the grin on his face proved that having a cute blonde practically fall into his lap hadn't insulted him too much.

Once the tram had settled down, Henriette stood up to her full height of five-foot-five and got her clothes in order - her warm tweed jacket had become a little crooked, and her long, dark gray skirt had slipped aside to reveal a sensible shoe and a socked ankle. Both items were quickly taken care of, as was her black beret that had been knocked slightly askew on her shoulder-length, white-blonde hair.

Looking ahead through the gloomy late February darkness, she suddenly spotted two German officers waiting at the next stop. Though the special letter she had in her purse wouldn't mean a thing to anyone not initiated in the decoding process, she felt it most prudent to avoid any contact with the enemy for the time being. With a casual smile at the man she had bumped into, she began to shuffle out onto the open platform at the tail end of the car.

No sooner had the tram come to a halt at the stop where the German officers were waiting before she stepped down onto the pavement and walked away in an unhurried yet determined stride. It hadn't been the right one for her - she lived another four stops down the line - and she knew it meant she would be home even later. 'I hope Vera won't be too worried,' she thought, glancing to her left at a German staff car that drove past on the boulevard, cutting up two bicyclists who had to take evasive action.

Shivering, she pulled her tweed jacket closer and upped the pace to keep warm. Her breath was visible as plumes of steam that made her look like a locomotive pulling a heavy load. The February cold soon crept up her legs, and she was glad she was wearing her winter bloomers. Another quick look at her wristwatch proved that it was a quarter past five, and she upped the pace even further so Vera wouldn't have to wait for too long.

She kept her eyes on the pavement as she walked down the boulevard, having learned from the past five years that the best way of getting into trouble with the Germans or the HIPOs would be to study the people she met on the street. She simply couldn't know who she'd meet and the risk of looking at someone she shouldn't have was too great.
Two cars that drove past her far beyond the speed limit made her glance out at the boulevard. A cold shiver ran down her back as she realized the two cars both belonged to the HIPO Corps, and that they were headed towards the side street where she and her dearest friend Vera Holgersen shared an apartment.

A huge sigh of relief escaped her lips when both cars drove past the street and went further along the boulevard toward the City Hall Square. Briefly closing her eyes, she prayed to whomever would listen that the day where she and Vera were apprehended by the brutal auxiliary police would never come.

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After letting herself into the main entrance of the five-storey building housing her apartment, she quickly checked the notice board just inside the door to see if there were any messages for her. The only note on the board was from the janitor who advised all residents that a chimney sweep was scheduled to arrive the following Thursday and that he would need access to the apartments in order to clean the stoves and the pipes of the tarry soot that had come from the low-quality coke they had been using.

Grunting, Henriette began shuffling up the stone staircase, but a strange sound from the connected basement made her stop and look over the railing. In the bicycle storage room at the foot of the stairwell, the wooden door to the back courtyard appeared to slap against the doorjambs.

"Mmmm!" she grunted as she turned around and shuffled back down the steps. "The stairwell is cold enough already... there's no need to invite King Frost inside for tea and scones!"

Once she was down in the storage room, she resolutely strode over to the flapping door and slammed it shut, closing all three latches. Huffing, she turned back around - but suddenly found herself face to face with a man in a dark cotton raincoat.

Her blood froze over and her heart almost stopped beating, but her shock only lasted for a few seconds; then she recognized the familiar spotted face of the teenage son of one of the other residents.

"Jens," she hissed dangerously as the fair seventeen-year old boy stepped out of the shadows with a sheepish look on his face, "how many times have I told you to stop playing those silly games!"

"But Miss Brandt, me and my friends are just practicing for the liberation!" he said, pointing at a red, white and royal blue armband on the left sleeve of the cotton raincoat - the recognized mark of the resistance movement. "We heard on the BBC that the Germans are-"

"Take off that armband, you stupid boy!" Henriette said and quickly tore off the loosely applied cloth. "What do you think will happen if you or your friends are spotted by the Germans or a collaborator?"

"I- I don't kn- we were just playing, Miss Brandt..."

"Are your friends wearing them, too?"

"Y- yes..."

"Jens, even if the Germans are being forced into retreat in Europe, they are still here and they won't think twice about taking you in for questioning or worse. You have to promise me you and your friends will never wear these armbands again."

"Miss Br-"
"Promise me, Jens."

"I promise, Miss Brandt," the teenager said, nodding sheepishly.

"Good. Now go out and tell your friends. You can still play, just leave the armbands at home... and close the door behind you!" Henriette said, crumbling up the armband and putting it into her jacket pocket.

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When she finally made it to her apartment on the third floor, a distant chatter of voices made her put her ear to the front door. She was able to pick up two female voices from the apartment: Vera Holgersen was one, and the other was Lydia Thorbjørnson, their downstairs neighbor who frequently came up for a chat and to borrow a cup of whatever she had run out of on the day.

The voices were friendly and unforced so Henriette found her house keys and unlocked the front door. "Hello, everybody! Sorry I'm late!" she shouted as she took off her beret and flattened her blonde hair that was held in place by several hairpins.

After hanging the beret on a free coat hook in the narrow hallway, she turned around to take off her tweed jacket, but before she had time to do so, Vera had come out into the hallway with a look of heartfelt relief on her face.

The tall, dark-haired twenty-nine year old quickly closed the distance between them and pulled her shorter lover into a strong hug. "I was getting a little worried," she whispered for Henriette's ears only. "There's been an awful lot of HIPO activity today, and... well, let's not dwell on that."

"I know... I saw two squad cars just now. There must be something going on somewhere," Henriette said in a matching whisper, running her hands up and down Vera's long back. "Hey... what on earth is that you're wearing?" she said out loud as she took a step back from her long-time partner to look at the salmon-colored satin pajamas, the quilted housecoat and the bare feet in slippers.

"I was waiting for you to come home!" Vera whispered, stifling a snicker. "But then Lydia came up to chat, and I didn't want to throw her out..."

"Oh... I see," Henriette said with a smirk. Smiling, she took off her tweed jacket and fluffed her dark red shirt. "I suppose we better be friendly to her, even if she did rob me of some quality time with you."

"We better," Vera said and hooked her arm inside Henriette's on their way back into the living room.

The three-room apartment they shared was modest but it was their home. When they had moved in in May 1937, they only had a bed, two chairs and a dinner table between them, but they had managed to assemble a few very classy items through Henriette's talent for haggling at flea markets and the like.

The rug on the floor of the living room was supposedly a genuine Persian, but it didn't matter if it was made in Roskilde - Henriette simply loved the checkered pattern of interweaving crimson and black diamonds. The near side of the room below a colorful painting of Kronborg Castle was the home of a couch arrangement in the elegant Louis XIV-design, consisting of a two-seater settee, two chairs and a small coffee table, and the opposite side saw a sideboard of polished mahogany that held the radio, the drinks cabinet and a few of their favorite books.

The room was completed by a small, round dinner table with seating for two that had been placed by the window so they could look outside while they enjoyed their meals.
Their two-seater settee was presently occupied by the slightly stocky and plump frame of Lydia Thorbjørnson, but the late-thirty-something woman who was wearing a coarse, gray dress, a dust bonnet and a bright red apron quickly stubbed out her cheroot in a metal ashtray and got on her feet when she spotted Henriette walking into the living room. "Oh hello, Henriette. Nice to see you... you look chilled, is it cold outside?"

"A little. Hello, Lydia. How is your husband?"

"Oh, he's just fine, just fine," Lydia said and waved dismissively. "He's finally left for work. This week he's patrolling near the City Hall Square. I thought I could get something done, you know! But then I realized I didn't have enough suds left to wash the kitchen floor and I came up to Vera to hear if she had any, but you're apparently just as much out as I am. Oh, I wish the soap rationing will soon come to an end. I can live without petrol for the car because we've never had a car, me and Poul, but having to live without soap... or coffee... or sugar... or my favorite brand of cheroots, is killing me slowly!"

Henriette sat down in one of the chairs at the couch arrangement to loosen the straps on her shoes, but she never made it further than: "Well-"  

"Oh, have you heard the latest?" Lydia said, putting her half-smoked cheroot into the pocket of her apron. "While I was dusting earlier on, Mrs. Paaske from next door told me that... oh, will you listen to me going on and on? Oh, I'm sure you don't want to listen to me when you've just come home from work!" she continued, clapping her hands together.

Desperately seeking a rescue, Henriette glanced up at Vera who simply stifled a smirk.

"Mrs. Thorbjørnson, it's been a cozy afternoon," Vera said, deciding to be the savior by moving over to their downstairs neighbor and putting a hand on her elbow, "but I'm afraid we have some friends coming over later tonight so we really need to get cracking on the supper et cetera. It's our Bridge night, you see."

"Oh! Oh, of course... silly me," Lydia said and swept a loose strand of hair up under her dust bonnet. "But of course. Oh, I'm sorry that I've detained you for, uh, a couple of hours."

That piece of news made Henriette shoot her lover a look of pure, unbridled sympathy - one that was answered by another smirk.

"That's quite all right, Mrs. Thorbjørnson," Vera said and helped their guest out into the narrow hallway. "It's always interesting to get up to speed on the latest."

"Indeed it is! Goodbye, Vera... goodbye, Henriette," Lydia said on her way out the door.

"Goodbye, Lydia!" Vera and Henriette said as one, remembering to wave politely.

"Is she gone?" Vera whispered out of the corner of her mouth as the door closed behind their guest.

"All gone."

Without speaking another word, Vera put her hand behind Henriette's head and pulled her close for a nice, warm and comforting kiss. "I was worried about you," she whispered as they separated. "I love you."

"I love you, too, Vera. God, I hope the day will come where we can be open about our love... this charade is starting to grate on me."
"I doubt that'll happen in our lifetime, love," Vera said and hooked her arm inside Henriette's as they moved back into the living room.

"Mmmm. Do we have any coffee substitute left? I could certainly use a cup."

"I'll see what I can do..." Vera said and reached down to give Henriette's backside a little squeeze.

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Twenty minutes later, the brown liquid that looked like old-fashioned coffee but smelled and tasted nothing like it had been consumed, and a sense of peace finally fell over Henriette as she kicked off her slippers and folded her legs up underneath her in the settee. "Come, please be my pillow," she said and patted the empty seat next to her as Vera came back in from the kitchen.

Once the tall woman had done as asked, the two snuggled up together and silently enjoyed the intimacy for a little while. "Today at work, I received another update from Lilly," Henriette said with her head resting on Vera's shoulder.

"Oh?"

"Yes. I feel we're getting to the point where we need to try to send it up the line. I only skimmed it, but there seems to be something brewing. There's been a lot of very important intelligence in the updates Lilly has given us."

"I agree, but..."

"But?" Henriette said and leaned back from her lover.

"Love, you know the last time we tried to send something up the line, our controller said it was nowhere near enough," Vera said and ran her hand along Henriette's thigh.

Henriette grunted and leaned back onto Vera's shoulder. "Once we decode the update, you'll see what I saw. I'm sure of it."

"On that note," Vera said and turned her head to kiss her lover's hair, "the potatoes have already been peeled and we only need to put the pot on the stove. We have time before dinner to do one of two things. We can kiss for a little while, or we can look at the message. It's all up to you."

"That's blackmail!" Henriette said in a mock growl. Acting fast, she leaned in and placed a wet, sloppy kiss right on Vera's lips. "This'll have to do for a while. The message is more important."

Vera smirked, but nodded her understanding of the situation.

Another little peck followed before Henriette left to get the note from her purse. When she came back, she unfolded the piece of paper and placed it on the coffee table. At first glance, it was merely a short, typewritten note referring to someone's birthday party, but when the two women began to read it carefully, the true meaning came out.

"Three high-ranking officers from the SD and the SS in meeting with Standartenführer Heidenreich. High alert. News from Fatherland not good, everyone jittery," Vera said, running her index finger along the lines and decoding the message on the fly. "Retrieved valuable info from informant. More prisoners will follow high profile case from last week. Archives are being processed at breakneck speed."
Henriette let out a long whistle and began to rub her chin. "So... I think we've found out why the HIPOs are so active. Sounds like they may be close to cracking open a resistance group. The high profile detainee from last week must be Richard Kofoed, the son of a politician. That was all over the propaganda press."

"Yeah," Vera said and folded up the letter before putting it back into the envelope.

"They must have made him talk... dammit! If our controller had only listened to us the first time! That was months ago!" Henriette barked and shot up from the couch.

Still holding the envelope, Vera looked at her agitated partner and offered her a comforting smile. "Love, we don't know if that would have made any differe-"

"Of course it would, Vera! Don't you understand? If the archives had been destroyed when we first mentioned it to the controller, six... no, seven brave men would still have been alive today. Think about that, seven families wouldn't have been torn apart by the Nazi swines! And who knows how many more will be affected by this latest offensive?"

"Love-"

"No, Vera, listen to me," Henriette said and stomped over to her lover, "we simply must convince the controller to send this info further up the line. This requires a coordinated effort. Because the upper echelons think we're incapable of handling even the slightest operation on the grounds of us being women, we can't even ask for weapons or explosives. But because I know Lilly from school, we have an inside line into the very heart of the Gestapo activity in Copenhagen! It would be high treason not to react on that!"

Vera sighed and rose to pull her agitated friend into a hug. "I know," she said quietly. "Tell you what... while you set the table and prepare the supper, I'll give Hans-Otto Frederiksen a call and ask him over for a coffee and a chat later on tonight. I think this will convince him, but please don't blow your top like that while he's here. Don't forget he's already a little wary of us... there's no need to confirm his prejudices."

"I'll blow up when I bloody well feel like it," Henriette mumbled into Vera's neck, but she knew her partner was right.

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While Henriette went into the kitchen to prepare supper, Vera moved over to the mahogany sideboard where the telephone was located. Sitting down and crossing her pajamas-clad legs, she took a notepad and a pencil before she reached for the receiver.

"Hello Operator, I would like Atlas seven-seven-six-two, please," Vera said into the heavy receiver.

'Connecting, please wait,' a female voice said at the other end of the line. A few clicks and hisses followed before the line went silent - then Vera could hear it being picked up at the number she had chosen.

'The Frederiksen residence,' a young female voice said.

"Good evening. My name is Vera Holgersen. May I speak with Mr. Frederiksen, please?"

'One moment, please.' - After a few seconds and one or two fumbling sounds, a male voice came on the line. 'Good evening, Miss Holgersen. It's Hans-Otto Frederiksen.'
"Oh, good evening, Mr. Frederiksen," Vera said and held her pencil ready in case her controller said something she needed to jot down. "Remember the book we talked about the last time we met, the one explaining the Hippolyta myths?"

'I do.'

"Well, Mr. Frederiksen, I have some fascinating news for you. After studying it very closely, I have unearthed a strong connection between the infamous Amazon Queen and a character from the old myths you will quite simply have to see to believe. Would it be possible for you to pop over later tonight? Say, at eight or so?"

The line was silent for so long that Vera thought her controller had hung up on her, but he finally cleared his throat and spoke: 'It would, Miss Holgersen. But it needs to be better than the last time.'

"Oh, this is better, Mr. Frederiksen. Much better," Vera said, nodding into the receiver even though there was no way her controller could see it.

'Hmmm. All right. Eight it is. See you then, Miss Holgersen. Goodbye.'

"Goodbye, Mr. Frederiksen," Vera said and hung up.

Closing the unused notepad and putting it away, she rose from the chair and moved into the kitchen. With a sigh, she leaned against the doorjamb and observed Henriette who was just putting the single sausage they had managed to buy at the butcher's into boiling water.

Henriette felt her lover's eyes on her and turned around to offer the tall woman a wan smile. "Is he coming?"

"He's coming. At eight."

Nodding, Henriette turned back to mind the boiling water. "You better change," she said over her shoulder. "I'm afraid the salmon pajamas will only confuse him. Or perhaps confirm his prejudices... mmmm?" - the last word was delivered with a pair of cheeky, sparkling emerald orbs who were looking directly at the tall, blushing woman.

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Ten minutes to eight, Henriette moved over to the window overlooking the street far below while chewing on her already short fingernails. She was standing in full darkness to adhere to the very strict blackout rules, but it didn't bother her because it meant she could easily follow the activity down on the street without being spotted herself.

On Vera's suggestion, she had changed into a tan, long-sleeved dress that would supposedly give her a softer edge. Similarly, she had let her white-blond hair down to make it touch her shoulders in an elegant fashion.

Behind her, Vera was kneeling on the Persian rug to get the radio warmed up so they could catch the eight o'clock news from the state broadcasting service. Even though the radio station was controlled by the Nazi propaganda department, it was still possible to extract information by reading between the lines of the typically one-sided news items. "Can you see him yet?" she said as she got on her feet after a successful mission with the knobs on the old radio.

Like her partner, Vera had changed into something softer. In her case, it was a dark brown, short-sleeved pleated dress that created a good contrast to her fair skin and pale blue eyes. To complement her outfit, she wore fashionable flat-heeled shoes that would make her less imposing to their controller who was four inches shorter than she was.
"Not yet," Henriette said, looking to her left. If she pressed her cheek against the freezing single glazing window, she was able to look out onto the boulevard on the far left, but all she could see were regular people hurrying along with their hats well pulled down and their coats wrapped tightly to fight the February cold.

Moments later, two German police officers from the SD - the Sicherheitsdienst - strolled along the street from the boulevard and further to the right. Henriette shivered when she remembered the incident with Jens and his saboteur armband. 'If the Germans really are starting to get jittery, it won't take much for someone to contract a bad case of itchy trigger finger,' she thought, sliding a step backwards to get out of sight of the policemen even though they'd never be able to see her from that distance.

Just as she went back to the window, Hans-Otto Frederiksen came from the right on his bicycle. Predictably - and worryingly - he was stopped by the policemen who ordered him to produce his papers.

While one of the German policemen kept his submachine gun trained on the civilian, the other checked the paperwork thoroughly. Everything appeared to be all right because Hans-Otto Frederiksen was soon allowed to go on.

Throughout the incident, Henriette had been holding her breath, but when their controller crossed the street and parked his bicycle up against the front of their building, she let out a long, slow sigh.

"Is something wrong, love?" Vera said, slipping an arm down the sleeve of a knitted gray cardigan that she had decided to wear over her dress. Despite the stove being hard at work, it wasn't enough to combat the chill that crept along the wooden floorboards - perhaps her own, growing nervousness had something to do with it as well.

Stepping back from the window, Henriette pulled down all three blackout curtains and moved over to an upright lamp to turn it on. "He's here. He was just stopped by the SD."

"Oh..."

"That's not good, Vera. I'll bet they've already logged his name... if he's ever brought in for questioning, they'll know he's been here... which could lead them to us," Henriette said and wrapped her arms around her body.

"Darling," Vera said and quickly closed the distance to her partner, "let's take one thing at a time. All right?" she said, putting her hands on Henriette's upper arms.

"All right... but that's why it's imperative the archives are taken care of."

Just as the eight o'clock news started on the old radio, the man they were waiting for knocked on their door. "Always remember that I love you," Vera said and took the opportunity to steal a quick kiss. "But that doesn't mean I won't pinch your butt if you lose your temper while we're talking."

"I love you, too... and I would expect nothing less," Henriette said and quickly stood up on tip-toes to reciprocate the sweet contact.

While Vera ushered in their guest, Henriette went over to the radio to listen to the latest news updates. It soon became clear the speaker was reading from a cue sheet that had been fabricated by the propaganda department as every other sentence was a mindless glorification of the brave and victorious Wehrmacht and SS battalions and divisions fighting the Bolsheviks on the Eastern Front and the Tommys and the American GIs on the Western Front. The only news that wasn't a lie turned out to be the weather report at the end of the transmission: it simply said the cold snap that gripped the nation would continue well into the following week.

"Good evening, Miss Brandt," a male voice said behind her as she leaned down to turn off the radio.
Getting increasingly nervous, Henriette screwed on a smile and turned around to greet their bespectacled guest who was wearing a tan cotton raincoat, a dark gray, square-shouldered business suit with a matching fedora, and a white shirt with a pale gray tie. "Good evening, Mr. Frederiksen. How nice to see you. I hope your wife is feeling well?"

"She's just fine, thank you. Her pregnancy is going according to plan. She'll deliver in late May," Hans-Otto said and took off his cotton raincoat and his fedora to reveal his slicked-down hair that was parted in the middle.

"Oh, that's good to hear. Would you like a drink? We still have a few drops of brandy left from before the war. British, quite exquisite..."

"No thank you, Miss Brandt," Hans-Otto said and sat down in the chair that was placed at the end of the couch.

Behind them, Vera came in carrying a tray with three glasses and a few napkins, but a quick shake of the head by Henriette made her spin around and take the whole thing back out into the kitchen.

Hans-Otto Frederiksen crossed his legs and let his free foot wag impatiently in the air. "Miss Holgersen said you had something for me?" he said in a voice that proved he was still skeptical.

"We do... we certainly do, Mr. Frederiksen," Henriette said and produced the folded-up note. "A note I received earlier today," she continued, handing the note to their guest.

While Henriette folded her dress neatly and sat down on the chair facing Hans-Otto, the man she was looking at began to study the typewritten letter. Moments later, Vera came back into the living room and mirrored her partner's actions by arranging her dress before she sat down on the couch, remembering to keep her legs closed and turned to the side in a very lady-like fashion.

"Hmmm," Hans-Otto said, suddenly leaning forward on the chair. "You weren't exaggerating when we spoke over the phone, Miss Holgersen... this is better than last time. Far better."

"We arrived at the same conclusion, Mr. Frederiksen," Vera said with a solemn nod.

Hans-Otto grunted as he finished decoding the note. Wearing a dark, pensive look, he re-folded it and put it on the coffee table. "On its own, it still wouldn't be enough, but--"

Henriette scrunched up her face until it had been reduced to half its regular size. She gripped the armrest hard and leaned forward quite decisively, ready to present their guest with a few colorful phrases that he had probably never heard before, but a glance at her partner's raised eyebrow convinced her to calm down—at least for the time being. Swallowing hard, she fell back against the backrest and forced herself to listen to their controller.

"-in correlation with other intelligence we've gathered from a group in Charlottenlund, we may have a critical situation on our hands. I doubt you have noticed, but the HIPOs have been very active these past few days."

"Oh, we've noticed all right, Mr. Frederiksen," Henriette said, nodding. "With our very eyes, even."

Vera quickly coughed twice in a fashion that sounded suspiciously like she was trying to send her partner a warning about that butt-pinching thing she had mentioned earlier.

Henriette simply smiled and rose from her chair. "Mr. Frederiksen, how do we proceed from this point? From reading between the lines, I get the impression you feel there could be some weight to this note," she said while she moved over to the mahogany sideboard to get the notepad and the pencil Vera had left there earlier.
"I do, yes. Like always, we'll get in touch with the Special Operations Executive in London and give them what we have. Once they've analyzed the material and come to a conclusion, they'll decide what to do... or rather, how to do it."

"Oh..." Henriette said, lowering the notepad. It didn't take a detective to decipher the look of disappointment on her face - she had dearly hoped that she and her partner would be allowed to play a role in the next phase of the operation.

Vera noticed at once and leaned forward to put a comforting hand on Henriette's elbow. When the two women looked at each other, Vera winked and sent Henriette a consolatory smile that unfortunately didn't appear to improve her state of mind.

Hans-Otto, utterly oblivious to the change in his hostess' mood, crossed his legs the other way and picked a piece of lint off his sleeve. "Now, you know as well as I do we've already contacted them with similar intelligence in the past and that they've declined to go on thus far, citing the risk of such a bold mission to outweigh the benefits."

"Mmmm-yes," Henriette said, nodding darkly.

"However," Hans-Otto continued, eyeing his blonde hostess sharply, "if they arrive at the same conclusion we have, I presume they'll go about it similarly to what we saw in Aarhus. A low-level Mosquito raid that'll knock out the Gestapo headquarters. Tell me, Miss Brandt, how did you come about this information?"

The last sentence had been delivered so casually that Henriette nearly replied in a matching, casual tone, but a little warning bell at the back of her mind told her their controller was trying to gauge how well she could keep her wits about her. "It came by mail to the law firm where I work as a secretary. Well, I say mail, but I actually meant a messenger. A German soldier from the Kurierdienst, their military courier service, actually."

"Mmmm?"

"Yes, and you should have seen the faces of the people I work with when the Feldwebel, the Sergeant, handed me the letter. He actually said Heil Hitler when he left, can you believe that?"

"Oh, I can believe a lot of things, Miss Brandt," Hans-Otto Frederiksen said and put his hands on the armrests to get up. "All right. I'll see what we can do. I can't give you any guarantees or even promises, but like I said... we'll see what we can do."

"That's all we can ask for, Miss Holgersen and I," Henriette said and rose to follow their guest out.

Behind her, Vera rose as well and took the folded-up note that Hans-Otto had put down on the coffee table. Studying it, she briefly wondered if they weren't about to bite off more than they could chew. The thought created a deep frown on her forehead and she looked at her partner with a rising degree of worry.

"Oh, by the way," Hans-Otto Frederiksen said as he put on his fedora and swept it to the side to make the brim line up just right. "Miss Holgersen, Miss Brandt, you need to burn the note you received. Although the official stationery it's printed on will help if the Germans ever conduct a door-to-door sweep of the building, it'll raise too many questions. Get rid of it."

With a harried expression on her face, Henriette glanced at her lover who was still holding the note. Although a comment was burning on her tongue, she felt it most prudent not to tell Hans-Otto Frederiksen that she had kept all the previous notes. Instead, she settled for nodding at their controller's advice.

"With that, I wish you a good evening," Hans-Otto said and left their apartment.
"Good evening, Mr. Frederiksen," Henriette said, but Hans-Otto had already closed the door behind him. When she came back into the living room, Vera had already found the other notes and a box of matches.

The two women briefly locked eyes and sent each other a silent message of relief before Vera struck a match and held it to the corner of the first note Henriette had received from her old friend from school.

*

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CHAPTER 2  

Thursday, February 22nd, 1945 - London - the SOE headquarters in Chiltern Court, Baker Street.

In an innocuous office on the second floor of the building housing the Special Operations Executive headquarters, a civilian secretary was sitting at a metal desk typing a letter on a typewriter. The pile in her In-box was larger than the one in her Out-box so she didn't really need further work, but soon, one of the twelve teleprinters next to her began to spit out line after line of highly classified information.

Grunting, she briefly looked over her shoulder at the annoying machine before she returned to typing up the letter.

After taking the letter out of the typewriter and giving it a brief once-over to make sure it was ready to be signed by her superior, she rose from her desk and went over to the appropriate machine - as always, her hard heels clacked on the smooth, pale gray linoleum floor.

Once the teleprinter sent out a ding meaning the report had been printed out fully, she tore off the reams of paper and put everything into a large folder marked TOP SECRET. The folder was soon sealed with hot wax - carrying the emblem of SOE and King George VI - and put on a cart near the door with the four other messages she had processed in the last fifteen minutes.

With a little flurry to sweep a loose lock of blonde hair back behind her ear, she went back to her desk and took the next item from her In-box.

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Twenty minutes later in a similarly innocuous office on another floor of the building, another secretary was handed the sealed folder from a messenger.

Thanking the young man, Sergeant Patricia Faulkner - originally of the Auxiliary Territorial Service but recently a much-valued employee of the SOE - went back to her desk and waited for the door to the hallway to close. When everything was in good order, she took the folder and broke the recently applied seal.

The reams of paper were quickly spread out on top of the desk, and she began checking the documents thoroughly. After a few seconds, she clicked on a light and pulled a chair over to get more comfortable while she performed her task.

The encoding stream and the headers and footers followed the proper format and syntax, and it didn't take long for her to find her stamp of approval and add a red mark on the top page.

Leaning back in her chair, she licked her lips and reached for a telephone on the desk. She quickly dialed an in-house number and waited for her immediate superior, the Deputy Director of the SOE, Major General Bernard McGuinness, to pick it up.
'McGuinness,' the Major General said in his typical gruff manner.

"Good afternoon, Sir, it's Sergeant Faulkner. We have received a document from Bletchley Park concerning operations in Denmark. Codes and syntax are valid."

'I see. Priority?"

"Medium, Sir."

'Send it to Captain Jacobsen. Thank you.'

"Very well, Sir. I'll see to it the Captain gets it. Goodbye, Sir," the Sergeant said and temporarily put the receiver back down before lifting it again and dialing a new, equally short number.

'Captain Edward Jacobsen speaking,' a surprisingly young voice said at the other end of the connection. The Captain only had a hint of a Danish accent, a legacy of having an English mother and going to a British private school during his formative years in Copenhagen.

"Good afternoon, Captain, it's Sergeant Faulkner. We have received an intelligence report from Denmark. The Major General has requested that you take a look at it as soon as you can. The priority class is medium."

'Uh... all right. I just need to... - shuffle, shuffle - 'All right. Send it over at once, please, Sergeant.'

"It'll be on your desk in five minutes, Sir. Goodbye, Captain Jacobsen."

Once again putting down the receiver, Sergeant Faulkner pushed the papers back into the folder and added a new seal of hot wax - then she pressed a button on the intercom on her desk to call for a courier.

-#-#-#

*Knock, knock!*

"Enter!" the twenty-eight year old Edward Jacobsen said from his position behind his desk. Tall, fair-haired and blue-eyed, the Captain couldn't outrun his heritage even if he wanted to.

When the Danish military forces had been forcibly disbanded by the German invaders, he had gone underground with several of his fellow officers in the hope they'd still be able to fight for their homeland, but it wasn't until he was contacted by a secret operative parachuted in by the SOE that he had considered leaving Denmark behind to actively coordinate the resistance efforts from the British shores - that had been in November of 1943.

For the first few months, he had continued to wear the Danish Captain's uniform he had taken with him, but a few unfortunate incidents in the city involving British servicemen home on leave, his Germanic looks and the unfamiliar uniform had meant he had been issued a standard British Army Officer's uniform, though he continued to wear the red and white colors of Denmark on a patch on his left shoulder.

Moments later, the soundproof door opened and a lanky, spotty courier stepped inside with the sealed folder. "Sir! The documents from Sergeant Faulkner, Sir," the young Corporal said, putting the folder on the Captain's desk.

"Thank you, Corporal. You're dismissed," Edward said and put his hand on top of the brown folder that had been labeled TOP SECRET.

"Sir!" the Corporal barked and hurried out of the office.
Once the soundproof door was closed, Edward rose from his desk and walked over to a table by the wall to get a paper cutter so he could break the seal.

Apart from the desk and the small table, all he had in the office were two swivel-chairs, a bookcase filled to the brim with maps and charts of Denmark and the neighboring waters, two metal filing cabinets with records of all SOE operatives with knowledge of Denmark, a large map of Europe hanging on the wall, and finally a silver picture frame of his wife that he had to leave behind when he had accepted the offer from the SOE - he had special dispensation from the Major General to have the frame on his desk.

As he looked around the utilitarian, sparsely furnished office he'd worked in for close to a year and a half, he still found it hard to understand that he of all people had been chosen to act as the sole liaison between the SOE and the Danish resistance.

The seal on the folder didn't give him much trouble and it wasn't long before he had the papers spread out onto the small table by the wall. Furrowing his brow, he pulled the wooden swivel-chair towards him so he could sit down while working on the document.

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Half an hour later, he leaned back in the creaky swivel-chair and ran an index finger up and down the side of his nose. The information that had been deciphered by the sharp minds at Bletchley Park was rock-solid, of that he was certain.

With a grunt, he rose from the chair and moved over to the bookcase with the maps and charts. After searching for the right one for nearly a minute, he finally found a map over Copenhagen and began to run his fingers across the many streets, housing blocks, squares and railway lines until he reached the target the Danish resistance had given them a thorough briefing on - the Gestapo headquarters.

"Bang in the heart of the city," he mumbled, tapping his finger on the spot on the pre-war map where Kampmannsgade and Vestre Farimagsgade were joined in a large intersection diagonally across from an open area where the subway ran. On the north-west side of the intersection was the L-shaped building that used to house the offices of the Royal Dutch Shell oil company before the war - in everyday terms, the target was simply called the Shell House.

Already coming up with a few names and forming a loose plan in his mind, the Captain moved over to his telephone and picked up the heavy, old-fashioned receiver. "Margaret," he said once his secretary had taken the call, "I need you to summon SOE operative Jørgen Ingvardsen to my office, please. I want him here as soon as possible. Also, when he comes, I would like two cups of coffee brought in, please. Thank you."

"Ah, good afternoon, Mr. Ingvardsen. Please come in," Captain Jacobsen said in Danish as he rose to greet his guest. The two briefly shook hands before the Captain pulled the second swivel-chair over to the larger of the two desks. "Have a seat," he continued, pointing at the chair.

"Thank you, Captain," Jørgen Ingvardsen said and moved over to the chair. As he sat down, he pulled up in his pants so they wouldn't get baggy.

The operative - wearing a non-descript gray business suit and white shirt - was in his late thirties though he looked younger. He was of average height, build and weight, and he had an average mousy brown hairdo and an average pair of brown eyes set above an average nose in an average face that didn't have any discernible features at all - in short, he was the perfect Mr. Everyman.
Behind them, Margaret came into the room carrying two cups of coffee. She looked around for a spot to put them, but quickly realized the only room was on the Captain's desk next to the picture of his wife.

Edward noticed as well and quickly pushed a pile of folders aside to make room for the cups. "Thank you, Margaret, that'll be all."

"Sir," she said before leaving the office and closing the soundproof door behind her.

Once the door was closed, Jørgen shuffled around on the hard chair and looked Edward in the eye. "May I ask if you are familiar with my record, Sir?" he said in English.

"Oh, we can speak Danish here, Mr. Ingvardsen. Our conversation isn't recorded," the Captain said, getting up to double-check the door was closed.

"Very well. Are you?" Jørgen said using his native, lyrical dialect so characteristic of those born on the island of Funen.

"Ah... yes, I am. I am indeed," Edward replied in a more upper-crust Danish dialect as he sat down behind his desk, thinking about the damning evidence of Jørgen Ingvardsen being utterly unable of staying away from the fairer sex. The operative had even been disciplined for it.

Before Jørgen had arrived at the office, Edward had thought of it as an asset - after all, the task at hand called for directly controlling a group of women, and who better to do that than a man who so clearly enjoyed female company - but now they were face to face, he wondered if it might not act as a hindrance instead.

"With that in mind, may I ask what this mission may hold in prospect for me?"

"Oh, you certainly may," Edward said to stall while he reached for his cup of coffee. Pulling the cup and the saucer towards him, he used the spoon to stir out the last grains of sugar before he took a sip.

Jørgen shuffled around again, clearly uncomfortable about being under the spotlight without knowing anything about what he was expected to do.

"Mr. Ingvardsen, are your Danish papers in good order? Your passes and permits, ration book and cards, driver's license... those things?"

"But of course, Captain. They're all in tip-top shape. Tip-top forgeries, mind you."

"Ah, yes. All right," Edward said and put down his cup. He noticed that Jørgen hadn't touched his coffee at all, but came to the conclusion that like so many of the people who had joined the British, the man probably preferred tea rather than the bitter taste of the dark brown liquid. "You'll go back to Denmark. To Copenhagen. We have just received information regarding a possible target, but we need a pair of experienced eyes on the ground to get the perspective from the other side... as it were."

"I see."

"The plans are still in the formative phase, but here's a rough draft: after you've dropped-in somewhere in Jutland, you'll take the train to Copenhagen where you'll meet and interact with a resistance group. Although the group hasn't yet been involved in any acts of sabotage, they've already been given a code name, the Knitting Club, simply because they're all women. Quite unusual. In fact, it's highly unusual," Edward said and sipped his coffee. "The members of the group use names from Greek mythology... Hippolyta, the Golden Fleece, Helen of Troy... why, some of them are even named after the mythical Amazons. Can you believe that?"
"I certainly can," Jørgen said with a sparkle in his eye, causing the Captain to look at him in a funny way.

"Uh... all right. In short, I need you to bring the members of the Knitting Club up to speed on anything they may be lacking knowledge of. From what I understand, they haven't been allowed access to firearms or explosives, so I suspect you'll need to focus on things like avoiding bringing attention to themselves, possibly covert radio transmissions, acquiring forged papers, et cetera, et cetera."

"Very well, Sir," Jørgen said, nodding darkly.

Just as Edward put down his empty cup, his phone rang. "Captain Jacobsen speaking," he said in English, leaning back in his chair. "I see. All right, I'll be there in a few minutes. Thank you, Margaret."

Hanging up, he rose from his chair and extended his hand toward his guest, effectively signaling the end of the conversation. "I'm afraid this is goodbye for now, Mr. Ingvardsen. The Major General has requested my presence," he said in his native Danish.

"I trust you'll keep me informed on any developments regarding the mission, Captain?" Jørgen said and gave Edward Jacobsen a good, strong handshake that made him wince from the pressure.

"Certainly, Mr. Ingvardsen," the Captain said, looking down at his hand that was still suffering from the aftereffects of the crunch.

* * *

Shortly after saying goodbye to Jørgen Ingvardsen, Captain Jacobsen straightened his uniform before he knocked on the door to Major General Bernard McGuinness' office.

'Enter!' the Deputy Director of the SOE said in his typical gruff manner.

Gulping, Edward depressed the handle and stepped into the office. As he was closing the door behind him, he once again noted that the Major General's quarters were a great deal more opulent than his own, modest corner of the SOE.

The Major General's work desk was a rather large affair, though still utilitarian in appearance, but it was the patterned carpet on the floor, the glass table imported from the colonies and the elegant Chesterfield chairs near a fireplace that really made the difference.

"Major General, Sir!" the Captain barked, saluting to his superior while standing at perfect attention.

The Deputy Director finished signing his name on a piece of paper before he looked up at the young man. Major General Bernard McGuinness was in his mid-sixties, and his tall forehead, his sharply defined face and his well-groomed mustache gave him an air of being a hard, but knowledgeable man. "Have a seat, Captain," he said, pointing at a chair behind Edward.

Once Captain Jacobsen was seated, the Major General rose to his full height of six foot four and walked over to a very recent map of occupied Europe. He briefly studied Denmark on the map before he went back to his desk and rested his hip on the edge. "What's your conclusion, Captain? Is it worth it?"

"I believe so, Sir. The intelligence seems solid and it comes from a highly reputable source. Hans-Otto Frederiksen. He's the liaison for three resistance groups and we've never had problems with infiltrations... or even poor workmanship, for that matter."
"Mmmm. Good."

"There is, however, a small difference to this operation, Sir."

"Which is?"

"The group consists solely of women. They call themselves the Knitting Club."

"Hmmm!" The Deputy Director furrowed his brow and leaned in towards the young Captain. "All women?"

"Indeed, Sir. Until now, they have only helped distribute illegal leaflets and the underground newspaper, but I need to stress they've performed a sterling job with nary a hitch, save for the usual, war-related incidents that I'm sure you know are utterly unavoidable."

"Hmmm," Bernard McGuinness repeated as he got up from the desk. "Skirt or pants, a patriot is a patriot. All right. I believe I can approve your plans, Captain, but I'll need them on my desk within the hour to know for certain."

"Sir, " Captain Jacobsen said and moved to get up, but the Major General waved his hand at him.

"Hang on, Captain. I'm not done."

"I'm terribly sorry, Sir," Edward said and sat down again where he crossed his legs.

"Now, correct me if I'm wrong, Captain Jacobsen," the Major General said and walked over to a small table by the wall where he kept his spirits, "but since the group is an all-female one, I can't help but wonder if the standard plan will be insufficient this time. Won't you need a female operative?" he said as he mixed himself a whisky and soda.

"Regrettably, I don't have access to a female operative, Sir. However, I've already been in contact with Jørgen Ingvardsen, a highly skilled man from the island of Funen who joined us seven months ago. In that short time, he has completed courses in proper creation and detonation of improvised incendiary and conventional explosive devices, surveillance, burglary, cartography, encoding and decoding, guerilla tactics, assassinations, sharpshooting... the works, Sir."

The Major General chuckled and turned around to shoot the young Captain an amused look. "I see. That all sounds too outrageous for even Boys' Own Paper to print, eh?"

"Ah... yes, Sir."

"Excellent. Can I tempt you with a drink, Captain?" the Major General said, holding up a decanter with an amber liquid.

"No thank you, Sir."

"Hang on, Captain. I'm not done."

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"Ah... yes, Sir." 

"Excellent. Can I tempt you with a drink, Captain?" the Major General said, holding up a decanter with an amber liquid.

"No thank you, Sir."

"Grunting, the SOE leader walked back to his desk and sat down. "Mind you, all those skills won't guarantee success. I remember the early years of our operations in Denmark where everything the SOE put their hands on turned to muck. Specialists who broke their neck upon landing... the commander who was so British in his manners and posture he only lasted a day and a half before the Jerries took him... my God, man, we've seen it all."

"We have, Sir, but I have a very good feeling with regards to Mr. Ingvardsen. He's a fine, dedicated individual. Dare I say, a perfectly average Danish man."

Edward continued in his mind.
"I see, I see. Well. When is he due?"

"Two weeks prior to the raid, Sir. The plan is that he'll provide us with the latest intelligence from the ground in conjunction with the Knitting Club. He'll take pictures and write reports, and hopefully, we'll receive them before the planes take off," Edward said and shifted around on the hard chair.

"Ah yes, for that part we'll need clearance from the chaps at RAF Bomber Command. Lately, they've been rather upset with us for monopolizing a few Wings for the covert and not-so-covert operations we've conducted, but... eh," the Major General said and took a sip of his whisky and soda. "They'll huff and puff as usual, but in the end, they'll sign on the dotted line... as usual," he said, chuckling into the glass as he took another sip.

"Uh... yes, Sir."

"Right. Captain Jacobsen," the Major General said and was suddenly transformed back into the hard commander, "I need your report on my desk within the hour. Once it's been approved, I'll get in touch with Bomber Command to get the ball rolling. Thank you, that'll be all for now."

Edward bolted upright from the chair and stood at perfect attention. "Sir!" he barked, saluting his superior.

-*-*-*-

Several hours later, Edward Jacobsen put down a fountain pen and reached for the ringing telephone on his desk. "Captain Jacobsen speaking," he said, making himself comfortable on the hard chair.

'Captain, this is Major General McGuinness. I have added my signature to your battle plans.'

"Very well, Sir."

'I have contacted Air Vice-Marshal Becketts and asked him to provide us with a Wing for the raid. The Air Vice-Marshal will arrive with a Group Captain and a Wing Commander tomorrow morning at nine to get up to speed on the finer details of the operation. Among other things, they'll use aerial surveillance photos to build a three-dimensional model of the area around the Shell House that they'll use to train the crews. I have a few minor questions and suggestions to your plans, but we'll get into those at the meeting.'

"That's good news, Sir."

'Indeed it is, my good man. Would you believe, the Air Vice-Marshal seemed rather excited by the prospects of undertaking another large-scale operation. I take it the old chap was worried his men would miss out this late in the war. Hardly, I told him.'

"Well..."

'Captain Jacobsen, I want you to write up a suitable reply to your Danish compatriots and send it to the encoding chaps at Bletchley Park as soon as possible. Tell them it needs to be transmitted via the BBC and by the regular means. Goodbye.'

"I'll get on it straight away, Sir. Thank you, Sir, and goodbye."

Hanging up, Edward Jacobsen leaned back in his swivel-chair and let out a long, slow sigh. After a few seconds, he reached for his fountain pen and began to compose a message that would be sent back to the resistance group.
The first words came easily to him, but after the second line, the severity of the task overwhelmed him, and he needed to put down the fountain pen and rub his chin. "A female resistance group," he mumbled in Danish. "Oh dear, how will that ever work? I may have let my euphoria run off with me... even with their excellent track record, even if they're controlled directly by Jørgen Ingvardsen, these housewives can't be expected to do what the men have done. They're quite simply ill-equipped for the hardships of active operations... oh dear, oh dear," he continued in a mumble, ending the sentence in a deep sigh before he picked up the fountain pen and continued scribbling down the message.

* * *

Monday, February 26th, 1945 - a quarter to three in the afternoon.

Vera heard their telephone ringing on her way up the final flight of stairs to their apartment as she came home from her part-time secretary job at the Central Hospital. Cursing under her breath, she took two steps at a time and threw her hand into the pocket of her cotton raincoat to find her house keys.

Once she was inside, she didn't bother to take off her shoes, coat or even her hat - she simply ran over to the phone, catching it at the fifth ring. "Vera Holgersen speaking," she said, slightly out of breath.

'Good afternoon, Miss Holgersen, it's Hans-Otto Frederiksen,' the familiar male voice said at the other end of the line.

Growing tense, Vera quickly reached into the mahogany sideboard to get the notepad and the stencil. "Hello, Mr. Frederiksen," she said, holding the pencil ready.

'Oh, I have good news for you, Miss Holgersen. Uncle George is very pleased that you thought of him for the birthday bash. He gladly accepts the invitation and is very much looking forward to spending a few hours at the party.'

"Mmmm," Vera mumbled through a pair of lips that had been reduced to two gray, highly tense lines in her face. As she wrote down the encoded message their controller relayed to her, she wished she had been able to share the momentous occasion with her lover.

'Yes. Uncle George can't say exactly when he'll be here, that all depends on the train schedule, what the weather's doing and so on and so forth. Oh by the way, when his nephew heard of the party, he pleaded with him to come too, and he'll arrive ahead of time, on the Jutland train at the central station. I'll tell you more when we get closer to the birthday bash. Oh, and uncle George's nephew is from Svendborg so he'll need a helping hand finding his way around the big city, ha ha. I'm sure you'll work everything out.'

"We will indeed, Mr. Frederiksen," Vera said, drawing a question mark behind the word 'nephew' and a fat box around the whole thing. "Thank you very much for giving us the good news. We appreciate it."

'You're welcome, Miss Holgersen. Goodbye.'

"Goodbye, Mr. Frederiksen," Vera said and hung up. She kept standing at the phone with the notepad in her hand, staring into space with a humorously vacant look in her blue eyes.

She couldn't quite believe the suggestion they had made had been approved by the SOE and turned into an honest-to-goodness plan, and she could believe even less that they would - by the sound of it - be assisted by an operative.

"An SOE operative! A secret agent!" she said out loud as she finally snapped out of her stupor and went into the hallway to take off her hat and her coat. "I didn't think that was how they'd do it... but I guess it makes perfect sense.
Oh, I can't believe Henriette wasn't here to get the news as it happened!" she continued as she dug into her coat pocket to find a handkerchief.

Shaking her head in disbelief, she blew her nose and walked into the kitchen to make herself a cup of coffee substitute and to begin preparations for supper.

---

Ten past five, the faint, metallic rustling of a key being stuck into the lock in the front door made Vera jump up from the couch where she had been reading the Women's Journal and race into the hallway.

Henriette had barely set foot in the hallway before she found herself practically bowled over by the five-foot-ten frame of one highly excited Vera Holgersen. "Goodness me!" Henriette said into Vera's chest - a result of being yanked into a hug. "Is the war over? It wasn't when I drove home in the tram. There were Germans everywhere..."

"No!" Vera said and took a step back. "But Hans-Otto called."

"Oh! And?"

"It's on."

"It's on?" Henriette parroted in a voice that had gained a slight tremble.

"It's on, darling. They've accepted everything," Vera said and leaned down to give her partner a loving welcome-home-from-work kiss. Separating, a beaming Vera traced Henriette's silky soft cheek and jaw with an index finger.

"Goodness me..." Henriette mumbled, falling into the same comatose state Vera had been in earlier. Working on auto-pilot, she reached up and pulled off her black beret but didn't have enough wherewithal left to put it on the coat hook nor to flatten her white-blond hair. "I, uh... goodness me. When?"

"Mr. Frederiksen didn't tell me... I'm not sure it's even been decided yet. But that's not all."

"Goodness me," Henriette mumbled again, though this time, she gave herself enough of a kick up the backside to flatten her hair, take off her tweed jacket and push off her shoes. Quickly sticking her feet into a pair of slippers, she wanted to go into the bathroom to freshen up, but stopped when it was clear by the excited look on her partner's face that not all had been said yet. "What is it, Vera? You're dying to tell me something...?"

"I am! Hans-Otto also said... well, not directly, but it's what he meant... that the SOE will send in an operative who'll assist us! A secret agent!"

"Really?"

"Aamr!" Vera exclaimed and held up her fingers in a Scout's Oath like the old phrase demanded.

"When?"

"Uh... Hans-Otto didn't actually say," Vera said with an embarrassed little shimmy. "But he said he'll call again when he knows more."

The stunned expression on Henriette's face soon faded away and was replaced by a deep, dark frown.
Vera, mirroring her partner's look, began to chew nervously on her already short fingernails. "Wh- what's wrong, love?"

"I. Missed. It," Henriette growled before she strode into the bathroom to heed nature's rather persistent call.

At the end of the long day, Vera came into their bedroom wearing her housecoat over her favorite salmon-colored pajamas. The coat was quickly shed and hung over the backrest of a chair, and the slippers she'd had on her feet followed soon after.

Her partner had already gone to bed; Henriette was resting on her right, facing away from Vera's side of their double bed. She was breathing evenly and appeared to be firmly asleep.

Vera yawned and sat down on the edge of the bed, mindful not to disturb the other half of her heart. She briefly looked at the colorful magazine she had on her nightstand - the BT on Sunday from the week before - but her mind was too preoccupied to read, and she dismissed the thought as fast as it had come.

Instead, she lifted the thick winter duvet they were using and slipped her long legs up into bed. Snuggling down, she reached out to turn off her reading lamp, and then put an arm behind her head.

The darkness fell over her like a shroud, but she knew almost at once sleep would be elusive. The thoughts regarding their future baptism of fire churned ceaselessly in her mind, rendering her incapable of finding enough rest to give herself a ticket to dreamland.

Even thinking about what the operation might hold for them gave her a dull ache in her gut that required two hands on her stomach to go away.

'After the big strikes in August '43 and June '44,' she thought, closing her eyes to look at the pictures her mind's eye drew for her, 'after the Germans took decisive control over the police and declared the only fitting punishment for captured members of the resistance was a firing squad, many brave men have died. And many brave women, too. And there are informants everywhere... every single person we confide in, or give a leaflet to, could be a snitch for the Nazis, even those you'd never think would be able to do it... just the other day, a resistance group was infiltrated and cracked wide open. That's what Lilly warned about in the last letter from her, dammit!'

Vera sighed and shuffled around under the duvet, needing to - but ultimately unable to - find relief from the dark thoughts that raced through her mind.

'God, some of the stories I've heard at work about what the Germans and the HIPOs do to captured women... if Henriette and I are ever caught, we should pray they'll send us to the Frøslev concentration camp. There, we'll at least have a chance of staying together...'

The dark thoughts became too strong for her to handle, and she opened her eyes to get away from the grisly images that still played on the inside of her eyelids.

Once her eyes had grown accustomed to the darkness, she looked around the bedroom, thinking about some of the things she and Henriette had gathered over the eight years they had been together. They didn't have anything of value, except perhaps the polished mahogany sideboard, but even that hadn't been as expensive as it looked. The few paintings on the walls, their books, the furniture they had bought together - she didn't want to lose any of it, but she knew there was a risk it could happen.
However, if she lost the most important thing in the whole, wide world - the beautiful, kind, warm, loving woman sleeping next to her - she knew she would wither up and die. It might take her a week, or a month, or several months to finally perish, but perish she would.

The mere thought of losing the love of her life made her press her lips together and swallow hard. Glancing to her right just to make sure the blonde was still there, she noticed that Henriette's sleeping form had gained a tenseness it hadn't had before. "Psst... are you asleep?" she whispered, holding her breath until she had heard an answer.

"Nah," Henriette whispered back. "Not really. What time is it?"

"Quarter past eleven. We've only just gone to bed, love."

"Mmmm..."

"I can't sleep either," Vera said quietly, ending the sentence in a sigh that underlined her words. "Too many thoughts."

Grunting, Henriette shuffled over onto her other side and snuggled up to Vera's long body. Wrapping an arm across her partner's chest, she placed her head on the pajama-clad shoulder and let out a contented, little sigh. "I know," she said after a few seconds. "Same for me."

"How long do you think this hellish war will last? I've heard at the hospital the Nazis have really been pushed back... Eisenhower's troops are inside Germany now, even if the propaganda radio will never admit it. Maybe if we're lucky, the war will be over before we can risk our necks," Vera said and reached behind her lover to give her a little squeeze through the sleeping shirt.

"We said that five years ago, love," Henriette said into Vera's shoulder.

"Yeah... I know."

When nothing else came from Vera for several minutes, Henriette pulled back slightly to look at her partner's face through the darkness. "Are you having second thoughts?"

"Yes," Vera said, once again underlining her words with a heavy sigh.

"I'm nervous, too, love. This will be the first real job for the Knitting Club if we ignore handing out the leaflets and the illegal newsletters and those minor things. Are we ready for it? I'm not sure... but we can't back down now."

"No. Oh, Henriette, I... I love you so much, and... and I'm frightened out of my mind that something will happen to you," Vera said in a thick voice that sounded suspiciously like she was trying to hold back tears.

Henriette sighed deeply and shuffled back to wrap her arms around her lover's upper body. "I love you too... and I'll love you until the day I die," she whispered, leaning her head down on Vera's pajama-clad shoulder.

Vera kept waiting for Henriette to utter something like 'nothing is going to happen to us,' or 'don't worry, we'll outsmart them,' or any of the other corny, cliched phrases that would be appropriate for the situation they were in, but nothing came. Sighing again, her churning mind hadn't been appeased one little bit by their nocturnal conversation, and she knew sleep would be a long time coming for her.

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CHAPTER 3

Wednesday, March 7th, 1945 - a quarter past six in the morning.

"All right, Mr. Frederiksen," Henriette said, standing in the living room in her sleeping gown and Vera's house coat that she had hastily thrown over her shoulders. "Oh, don't worry, we'll show Uncle George's nephew all the sights. Thank you for calling. Goodbye."

Hanging up, she hastily scribbled down the essence of the information relayed to her by their controller: 'Nephew arriving on the four o'clock train at the central station, wants to see the sights, needs a place to sleep. Password is How was Svendborg? Sunny if he's safe, rainy if he's being watched.'

Henriette took a very deep breath and let it out slowly as she read the message again. The words seemed to flicker before her eyes, but she knew it was the adrenaline pumping around her body. Turning off the small lamp on the mahogany sideboard, she shuffled into the center of the living room and let the words sink in.

Behind her, Vera stuck her head out of the bathroom door, revealing a bare shoulder and just the tiniest centimeter of a naked breast. "Darling? Who on earth was that calling at this time of the morning?"

"Hans-Otto Frederiksen," Henriette said in a strong whisper, suddenly afraid they were already being surrounded by German soldiers.

"Oh... oh dear," Vera said and hurried back into the bathroom to finish up.

Henriette scrunched up her face and moved over to the window where she opened the blackout curtains just a fraction to peek out. The street below and the boulevard to the far left were mostly empty, save for a few bicyclists, and yet she couldn't shake a feeling of being watched from every single window in the apartment building on the opposite side of the street.

'With the operative arriving today, it must mean the attack is drawing closer,' Henriette said and began to chew on her fingernails. To underscore the seriousness of the situation, a chill crept up her bare legs, and she hurried into the bedroom to get dressed, deciding to skip her regular morning routine.

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Fifteen minutes later, Vera and Henriette - standing in the middle of the living room and working on converting an old sofa-bed for the operative - pulled back from a strong embrace that had suddenly felt as the most important thing in the world at that point in time.

Vera shook her head slowly as she traced Henriette's soft cheek and jaw with an index finger. "I'm scared, love. I think we're in over our heads. What we've done so far has been... has been... nothing but small potatoes compared to what we're about to head into."

Sighing, Vera nodded and went back into her partner's open arms. "I know. But if we back out now, we'd never again be able to look at ourselves in the mirror... we wouldn't be any better than the cowards and traitors who gave the Nazi salute to the pigs when we were invaded five years ago."

"Yes, but haven't we already done our share? We've handed out the illegal-

"No, love," Henriette said quietly and stood up on tip-toes to place a kiss on her partner's lips. The lack of response proved that Vera really was scared, so instead of kissing her further, Henriette reached around her long torso and pulled her into a strong, comforting hug.
"Thank you, darling," Vera whispered once they separated.

"You're welcome," Henriette said in a matching whisper, running her hands up and down Vera's blouse-clad back. "Come on, let's get the sofa-bed converted for Uncle George's nephew. The poor boy must be tired after the long train ride," she continued out loud, grabbing hold of the couch to pull it out to its full length.

"Arriving on the four o'clock train..." Vera said with a chuckle. "I wonder if they know it's slang for being a rube from the countryside?"

"I doubt it... love, you gotta pull a little harder or else it's going to take us all afternoon to get this bloody thing ready for him..."

"All right, all right," Vera said and got a better grip on the bed part of the couch.

Despite Henriette's predictions, it didn't take them long to make the sofa-bed, and soon, it appeared comfortable and inviting for whomever would sleep in it.

Fluffing the pillows, Vera stood up straight and broke out in a wide, if slightly nervous, smile. "I wonder what he looks like... I've never seen a secret agent before. Do you think he's like a Viking? I mean, huge and strong and imposing... you know, things like that?"

"Oh, I very much doubt it, love. After all, he needs to blend in."

"Uh... that's true, I suppose," Vera said and scratched her neck.

"I must admit I'm more worried about his mannerisms... his behavior," Henriette said and wrapped her arms around Vera's waist. "Even if you wouldn't think so, the British act very differently to us. They're far more formal and stiff... not as jovial and anti-authoritarian as we are. Mmmm. And then there's the humor... it's similar, but our humor is far cruder than theirs."

Vera sighed and leaned in to place a little kiss on Henriette's forehead. "Darling, I doubt we'll have much to laugh at when he's here."

"Probably not. So," Henriette said and pointed over her shoulder at the telephone behind them, "excuse me while I call in sick. I have an awful, terrible, most dreadful case of a bruised kissing-gland today... should last twenty-fours, right?"

At just after three in the afternoon, Vera and Henriette closed and locked their front door and began to walk down the stairs. They were both quietly nervous, but Henriette hid it best.

Spring had finally come to Denmark, but despite the much brighter light brought on by the lengthening of the days, the temperatures hadn't risen much above single degrees centigrade so they were both wearing long dresses under their winter coats.

Halfway down, they bumped into Lydia Thorbjørnson, their downstairs neighbor, who had quite clearly been down to the tobacconist to get a new pack of her indispensable cheroots.

"Oh, good afternoon!" Lydia said with the first cheroot already bobbing in the corner of her mouth. "Are you going someplace? Oh, of course you are, why would you be dressed like that if you weren't, ha ha. Oh, have you heard the latest?"
"Hello, Lydia. No, we haven't, but we're quite busy, so..." Henriette said with a smile that didn't reach her eyes - one thing they didn't have time for was gossip.

"Oh, but you really must hear this! Another customer down at the tobacconist told me, and I have every reason to believe him, mind you... anyway, he told me that less than an hour ago, a HIPO was shot dead by a saboteur further up the boulevard! And that's not all!!" Lydia said, nodding so hard the ash fell off the tip of her cheroot and landed on the stairs. "After he had died but before a squad car could come with reinforcements, someone else ran up to his body and stole his boots! I mean, can you believe it? Now, I hope you know I hate those HIPOs just as much as the next woman, but stealing a dead man's boots? Why, that's just...just despicable! And there I was, needing to come back from the tobacconist, and would you believe, each and every time I heard a motorcar, I winced and tried to hunch over so I'd present a smaller target!"

Henriette groaned long and hard on the inside, but settled for nodding absentmindedly at Lydia's long-winded story. An assassination of a HIPO in broad daylight would send the other members of the fanatical organization into a frenzy. It wouldn't be long before they would carry out punitive actions against random people on the street, and she and Vera had to walk a kilometer and a half through the city streets to get to the central station, and a kilometer and a half back with the operative.

"Oh dear," Vera said, taking the silent Henriette by the elbow and giving her a hidden push to continue on down the stairs, "how brutal. How incredibly brutal!"

"That's what I said! And then I thought, oh no, Poul is going on his patrols tonight... if he's unlucky, he may get arrested by the HIPOs or the Nazis, permit or no permit. Yes, yes, this damn war brings out the worst in people. Oh, I can see you're busy so I won't hold you up any longer," Lydia said and began to move up the stairs. "Bye-bye!"

"Goodbye, Lydia," Henriette said through her teeth as she began to move down the stairs.

Before Vera followed her partner, she turned back to their downstairs neighbor and shot her a wide smile. "By the way, we'll have our knitting friends over tonight for a little soiree so please don't be alarmed if there's more activity on the stairs than usual."

"Oh, that's so wonderful! Oh, I wish I could knit," Lydia said and moved a single step down to be at eye level with the far taller woman. "My Poul always tells me, Lydia, you're worthless with your hands. Then I always say, you certainly had a different opinion last night in the bedroom! He always blushes, the poor man, and I-"

By then, Henriette had had enough and left the conversation behind. She quickly made it to the ground floor and stepped out onto the street, saying a brief hello to Jens, the teenager who had worn the resistance armband earlier, before strolling towards Vesterbrogade to get to the central station.

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The small side street they lived on didn't hold any threats, but the major boulevard at the end of it was a different matter. By the time Henriette made it to the corner of Stempsgade and Vesterbrogade, she looked over her shoulder to see how far Vera had come. The tall woman was walking towards her in a fast stride, waving as she set off in a slow jog to make up for lost time.

At that time of the day the boulevard was typically busy, and March 7th wasn't any different. Hundreds of bicyclists drove past even in the short minutes Henriette waited at the corner. Two German staff cars and a truck went past, too, but no one seemed to notice the petite blonde in the pale tweed jacket and the black beret.

Although there were a couple of tram lines going past in the middle of the four-lane street, she and Vera had already decided they'd walk instead of risking bumping into German officers who seemed to prefer the comfort of being driven to wherever they were going.
"I'm here, darling," Vera said for Henriette's ears only as she finally caught up.

"One more minute of that and I would have strangled Lydia," Henriette mumbled under her breath, but a reassuring pat on her shoulder prompted a small smile on her face.

Walking with unhurried yet determined steps, Vera and Henriette made their way towards the central station, going past a draper's shop, a souvenir store, a coffee shop and a tobacconist that had a sign outside the store claiming their cigarettes were made of one hundred percent authentic Virginia tobacco. "Sure," Vera said as they walked past the sign, "and I'm a one hundred percent authentic virgin..."

"Yeah, huh?" Henriette said, sending her lover a wink.

By the time they reached the crosswalk they always used to get to the other side of Vesterbrogade, a black sedan from the SD drove onto the street and came to a screeching halt right in the center of the intersection.

"Oh God," Vera mumbled, but Henriette grabbed her elbow to make her shut up.

Two Germans in dark gray uniforms stepped out of the sedan and stopped the traffic. Soon after, a fifty man-strong detachment of regular German infantry came marching across the intersection going the opposite direction of where Vera and Henriette were going.

The reactions of the crowd couldn't have been more varied - a few waved at the soldiers or gave them a Nazi salute, but most people turned their backs to the marching men.

Vera started to turn around as well but Henriette stopped her before she could turn too far. In her peripheral vision, Henriette had spotted a man in a dark trench coat who was studying the crowds, not the soldiers. The plain-clothes man didn't seem out of place at all, but his posture and particularly the way he was observing the people there made Henriette's skin crawl. "Gestapo," she whispered, knowing it would be enough of an explanation for her partner.

By the time the last man in the marching column had disappeared up Reventlowsgade, the two SD officers got back into their black sedan and roared off to beat the column to the next major intersection. As the pedestrians went back to what they had done before they were interrupted, the man in the dark trench coat put his hands into his coat pockets and strolled on casually.

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The rest of the way to the central station proved less troublesome for Vera and Henriette, and they were soon walking down the stairs to get to the platform where the four o'clock train would arrive.

The first thing they saw when they reached the proper spot on the platform was a hand-written note informing the waiting passengers that they would have to wait longer - the four o'clock train would arrive at twenty past instead, following an extended stop-over at the ferry crossing at Halskov at the behest of SD-Obersturmführer Schmitt.

"Oh, isn't that just bloody typical," Henriette growled and stuffed a hand down her coat pocket to get a handkerchief so she could wipe her freezing nose.

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At long last, the steam locomotive chugg-chugg-chugged into the central station hauling five carriages. Twenty past four had long since come and gone, and Henriette and Vera had been resigned to watching the pigeons pick at crumbs thrown at them by the other waiting passengers.
As the locomotive came to a slow, noisy halt, massive amounts of excess steam billowed out of the side valves and the smokestack at the front, creating a hissing wall of noise that completely drowned out the P.A. speakers announcing the arrival of the four o'clock train on platform twelve.

Getting up, Henriette dusted off the seat of her winter dress and began to look for their visitor among the passengers.

Three stewards put footstools under the doors of the five-wagon train before opening them which gave the passengers a much shorter step onto the platform.

One passenger after the other came out of the train; some by themselves, but most with an arm hooked inside someone else's. At the rear of the train, a man stepped down onto the platform carrying a large suitcase and a smaller, strangely shaped travel bag. Unlike most of the passengers, he appeared to be looking for someone.

"Darling, I think I... yes, I definitely see a man standing alone at the rear of the train," Vera said, using her superior height to look over the heads of the people walking towards her and Henriette.

"I'll have to take your word for it," the far shorter blonde said surly.

"It's strange, though... he really does seem like someone's nephew from Svendborg. He isn't... well... he doesn't have a military air about him at all."

"Good!" Henriette said, deciding that enough was enough. With a constant stream of "Pardon me," "Terribly sorry," and "Excuse me," she barged her way through the tide of passengers going the other way.

The man they were there to meet eventually turned around and looked at them. Vera was almost struck dumb when she realized just how average the supposedly secret agent actually was - he appeared to be in his early to mid-thirties and he was of average height and build. He appeared to have average brown hair under his average hat, and his pale brown trench coat was similar to that worn by tens of thousands of others. Even his face was average with no special features to speak of whatsoever.

Henriette finally reached the tail-end of the throng and came through to a clear part of the platform. After adjusting her beret that someone had knocked askew, she screwed a smile on her face and put out her hand. "Good afternoon, Sir. Tell me, how was Svendborg?"

"Sunny, thank you," the operative said in his native, lyrical dialect as he shook hands with Henriette, confirming that he was safe and wasn't under surveillance from the Gestapo or other units. "Good afternoon, I'm Jørgen Ingvardsen. I'm Uncle George's nephew."

"Oh... you're a Dane? We had presumed you'd be British."

"Well, I'm not."

"Huh. Anyway, it's nice to finally meet you. I'm Henriette Brandt and this is my dear friend, Vera Holgersen," Henriette said, pulling Vera closer so she could be introduced as well.

Jørgen shook hands with the two women wearing a broad, warm smile he knew always worked wonders with the members of the supposedly weaker sex. When it seemed to bounce right off them, he took a step back and furrowed his brow ever so slightly, unable to decipher the body language presented by the tall brunette and the shorter blonde.

Behind them, the platform began to fill up with the passengers who were there for the next train, including a few German officers.
"Tell us," Vera said as she went back to Henriette and stood very close to her partner, "how is Uncle George these days?"

"Oh, he's a very busy man but he sends his best wishes, Miss Holgersen. He regrets he couldn't come at once, but he promises to make it to the birthday bash. Oh, and what a bash it'll be," Jørgen said, once more attempting his trademark warm smile that had so often given him free access to a woman's heart - and elsewhere.

Henriette nodded and reached down to take Jørgen's smaller, strangely shaped travel bag. It was unexpectedly heavy, but it was nothing a firm grip couldn't deal with. "Now, Mr. Ingvardsen, we have everything set up for you. We have a great sofa-bed all ready to go if you wish to catch a little nap before we start preparing the bash. The Knitting Club will be over later, and..."

"'We?' You're living together? You are two women who live together?" Jørgen said sharply, pinning Henriette to the spot with a hard glare that came out of nowhere from his otherwise average eyes.

The corners of both Vera's and Henriette's mouths twitched and began to creep downwards. "You better listen carefully, Mister," Henriette said in a hissing growl, shooting the operative a glare that matched the intensity of the one flying the other way, "I don't know how you do it in Svendborg or wherever the hell you're actually from, but here in the big city, unless people are in cohorts with the Nazi pigs, we let them live the life they want to live. Get it?"

A few seconds of unbearable tension went past with all three people just staring at each other - then Jørgen Ingvardsen nodded and offered his hostesses a slightly fake smile. "Oh, I get it. I just wanted to know where we stood, that's all."

"Ohhhhhh," Vera said as the tension rushed out of her like the air from a leaky balloon. Rubbing her temples, she was forced to lean against one of the large boards advertising the train schedules in the center of the platform to get her bearings.

It took a little longer for Henriette to come around, but she eventually nodded and put her free hand on Vera's elbow. "Fine. But just for the record, neither my dear friend nor I like to be treated the way you just did. You're here for a specific task, organizing the birthday bash. A business relationship, if you will... let's keep it at that, shall we?"

"Fine," Jørgen replied, taking his suitcase from the platform.

"Fine," Henriette echoed, striding off up the platform. She groaned when she realized she was once again forced to go against a tide of people, but they parted like the Red Sea for Moses when they caught a glimpse of the dark look she had on her face.

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Just over an hour later, the three people walked along Vestre Farimagsgade to get to the pivotal point of the whole assignment - the Shell House. They kept to the side of the street where the subway ran two storeys below in an open railroad trench to be able to observe the tall structure without appearing to be gawking at it.

Over his shoulder, Jørgen was carrying his travel bag that contained a concealed camera. He would be able to control the release by manipulating a long cable that ran up the left sleeve of his coat.

"Dammit," he whispered under his breath as he looked up into the sky. Because the train had been so late, the daylight was already fading fast but they were still several minutes away from the angle he wanted to take the pictures from.
The natural reaction to that would be to up the pace, but hurrying towards a heavily guarded, fortress-like command center crawling with enemy soldiers would be the perfect way to conduct suicide by proxy, so he kept to the pace they were already going at.

Walking on either side of the operative, Vera and Henriette were silent and achingly nervous. Henriette had noticed that her partner was pale and had her lips pressed together, a very clear indication of the stress she was under. Not that she wasn't affected by the situation herself, far from it. Looking ahead, she could see the first of the defensive positions put up by the Germans - movable road blocks with plenty of barbed wire, a concrete pillbox with the tip of a dark gray machine gun sticking out, scores of sandbags and finally several sentries in the regular gray uniforms of the German infantry.

Across the street from where the three people were, a tall building gave way to a cluster of low barracks, garages and stores selling products for motorcycles and automobiles.

Behind the barracks, the seven-storey building they were there for came into view. Foreboding in all its camouflaged glory, the Shell House was made up of a tall ground floor that used to be shops before the war, five regular storeys in the center that had been commandeered by various units of the SD and the Gestapo, and finally the attic under a large, gently sloping, tiled roof. The grand stairwell in the east-most corner of the building was covered by an impressive glass facade that stretched from the street and all the way up to the roof.

The three people finally arrived at the spot Jørgen had sought out. "Taking pictures now," the operative said quietly as he manipulated the release with his thumb. The camera in the bag clicked and whirred a couple of times, but it wasn't noticeable to anyone unless they were right next to the photographer.

"Good," Vera said through her teeth. Her face had lost even more color and she appeared to be on the brink of passing out. Her eyes darted this way and that to keep up with the many soldiers that patrolled the sidewalk in front of the Shell House, and her breath sounded unnatural and shallow.

Out on the street, a black, open-topped Mercedes staff car drove right past the three people and came to a stop in the turning lane as it waited for a gap in the oncoming bicycle traffic. Two officers in long, gray coats sat in the back talking among themselves.

Vera almost soiled her underwear, and she had to turn around and walk over to the open railroad trench to get her mind off the insanely perilous job they were in the middle of.

Once clear of the traffic, the staff car drove up to the roadblock and waited for a pair of soldiers to come out and move it aside. The street was soon clear and the driver did a quick U-turn to swing in front of the main entrance. The two officers in the back of the staff car stepped out and went through the entrance, saluting the sentries who had snapped to attention.

"Do you know who that was?" Jørgen whispered as he took his last picture, trying to aim the concealed camera at the officers.

"Only that it was a pair of bigwigs," Henriette said, trying to keep track of the soldiers, the operative and Vera all at once.

"One of them was *the* bigwig. That was SS Standartenführer Friedrich Heidenreich. The Oberst der Polizei... he's, uh, he's the right-hand man of the supreme chief of all Nazi police units here in Denmark... old General Panckow rarely leaves his desk, but the Standartenführer is a real hands-on guy."

"Christ on crutches..." Henriette croaked, feeling an imaginary noose slowly wrapping itself around her neck. "And he was only fifteen feet away from us..." she continued, loosening the neckline of her dress that was suddenly choking her.
Jørgen nodded and hooked his arm inside Henriette's to give the sentries across the street the impression that the three people were merely out on a tour of the city. "I have what I came for. Let's carry on... hang a right here and cross the little bridge over the railroad trench. That way, we'll be in their line of sight for so long they'll lose interest in us," he whispered out of the corner of his mouth.

In any other situation, Henriette would have yanked her arm back from the operative, but she was in no condition to answer - all she could do was to grab hold of Vera and pull the reluctant, shivering woman with them.

All in all, the covert filming had taken less than a minute.

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That same evening, Henriette excused herself from the meeting of the Knitting Club and moved quietly into their darkened bedroom. The thin door offered scant protection from the chitter-chatter that came from the living room, but at least it made it less intrusive.

Sighing, she kept standing at the closed door and peeked through the darkness at her partner who was lying passively on her back.

Vera had gone to bed soon after she, Henriette and Jørgen had returned from the dangerous mission they had been on, and she had stayed there for the remainder of the afternoon and evening - even the cool, damp washcloth she had over her forehead hadn't helped much.

"Oh love, I hate to see you like this..." Henriette whispered as she tip-toed over to the bed.

A deep sigh from the darkness proved that Vera wasn't sleeping. "And I hate to be like this..." she whispered back in a frail voice. "I'm so sorry. I'm a coward."

"That's the last thing you are, love. I was frightened out of my skin, too, you know," Henriette said and sought out one of Vera's hands. Instead of finding a hand, she accidentally poked her partner in the stomach, but it gave them a rare opportunity to let out a few chuckles. "Oops!" Henriette said, finally locating Vera's long fingers and promptly giving them a little squeeze.

"You better turn on the light, darling... this could be dangerous as well," Vera said in a voice that had regained some of its old warmth.

"I better. Are you ready? And Henriette said, Let there be light," Henriette chanted as she reached out for the cord to the lamp. After a bit of difficulty, she found it and trailed her fingers up the wrapped cloth until they reached the switch.

The reading lamp cast a pleasant, orange light on Vera and Henriette, and they exploited it to the fullest by leaning closer to each other and sharing a sweet kiss. "I love you," Henriette whispered. The first kiss was so pleasant she quickly leant down and stole another while she was so close to her lover.

"And I love you, darling. I think I can get up now. Are they all here?" Vera said and swept aside the duvet.

"Yes, they've all come... Birthe, Sussi and Mrs. Nørby-Henriksen. I told them you had your period. They believed me," Henriette said and moved aside so Vera could get out of bed. "Jørgen is entertaining them right now by showing them how to properly splint a broken leg. Boy, he's a womanizer... he went straight for Birthe the second he saw her. She's the guinea pig but she seems to be enjoying herself, so..."
"Oh, that's right up her alley. I swear she's read more medical romances than the rest of us put together," Vera said and swung her bare legs over the side of the bed.

Henriette smirked at the sight of her partner's long, shapely legs. She was hit by an irresistible urge to run her fingers up and down one of the silky smooth thighs while she offered the owner of said thigh a wet, sloppy kiss, but she knew they had to tone down the intimacy until they were alone. The kiss, however, duly followed.

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"Hello and good evening, everybody," Vera said as she walked into the living room in slippers, a pajamas and her house coat that she pulled closer when four pairs of eyes turned towards her. "I'm sorry I've been such a drag until now..."

"Oh, that's quite all right, dear," Rigmor Nørby-Henriksen said with a smile. At fifty-nine, Mrs. Nørby-Henriksen was the oldest of the five-women strong Knitting Club. Having already experienced the Great War, she was the one the others turned to to get the big picture - and on top of that, she was always good for a bawdy story or two despite her distinguished looks.

Birthe Rasmussen and Sussi Mørk were more demure, though - as always - that was a relative term. Like Henriette had said, Birthe had her leg worked on by the SOE operative in the middle of the floor, but she found the strength to wave at her friend. Twenty-nine years old like Vera, the two had known each other since childhood though they had been separated for years when Birthe's parents had moved to Jutland. With her dark blonde hair and brown eyes, she was quite the catch, and she was destined to be the perfect housewife for whomever would snare her in.

At a mere twenty-two, Sussi was the youngest of the bunch, but her bravery and ability to stay cool under duress had already come in handy on several occasions, best illustrated by an assignment where she gave the others enough time to get away with their illegal leaflets by flirting with a German officer. On top of that, it didn't hurt that she was a very good pickpocket. She had a certain street-tough quality about her gangly, bony frame - inevitable from growing up and living in the infamous Istedgade neighborhood - but her face could on occasion light up in a warm, broad smile.

"Let's have a few more refreshments," Henriette said and carried a heavily laden tray into the living room. The chitter-chatter resumed instantly as the cups and saucers were put on the table along with a tray with various cookies.

The members of the Knitting Club quickly helped themselves to the tea or coffee substitute, and it didn't take long before Henriette had to go into the kitchen to make some more.

While her partner was away, Vera pulled a footstool over for them to share. As she got comfortable and began to listen to Sussi and Mrs. Nørby-Henriksen relaying a tale of something that had happened to someone somewhere, she suddenly felt she was under strict scrutiny. Looking up, she locked eyes with Jørgen Ingvardsen who was giving her a silent Third Degree while he was working on Birthe's leg, almost like the operative was staring right into her soul to gauge her after her less-than-solid behavior at the Shell House earlier in the day.

Vera felt uncomfortable under the intense stare, but she gave as good as she got and stared back with her steely blue eyes. The incident was soon over as Jørgen turned his attention back to Birthe's supposedly broken leg.

"So," the operative said, patting Birthe's knee, "you're as good as new. Ladies, that's how you put a splint on a broken leg... let's hope you'll never get to do it in real life."

The other members of the Knitting Club thanked Jørgen for his sterling efforts, but Vera didn't feel like thanking him at all - more like kicking him out of their home.
Rigmor Nørby-Henriksen held up one of the cookies and smiled broadly at Henriette who came back into the living room with the next tray. "Oh, these oat meal cookies are excellent, dear. They taste just like they did before the war."

"Thank you, Mrs. Nørby-Henriksen," Henriette said and put a cup of tea substitute down in front of Jørgen. "They better be good because we used all our butter and sugar ration stamps to make them. Jørgen, do you want a few drops of Aroma Extra in your tea? It might take away the bitterness."

"Oh, that won't be necessary," Jørgen said and sipped the steaming hot tea. "It's just fine, thank you. Just like we drink it in England."

"Good, good," Henriette said, walking over to Vera to offer her the last cup of coffee. She noticed an uncharacteristic sour look on her partner's face, but - again - decided to pursue it later, rather than sooner.

At the same time, Mrs. Nørby-Henriksen cleared her throat and put down her cup, signaling the official start of the Knitting Club strategy meeting. "Ladies," she said, taking her purse from the floor next to the chair and putting it on her lap. "Yesterday over on Smallegade, a female informant was found dead. A traitorous woman who didn't think twice about calling the Nazis on even the slightest suspicion. She was promised twenty thousand kroner for each captured member of the resistance, but what she got for her poisonous tongue was a bullet in the throat. When that didn't kill the rat, she got another in the neck that silenced her forever. Heed my warning, ladies, don't wag your tongues! Even when you're among women!"

The rest of the Knitting Club nodded somberly. Vera and Henriette looked at each other, both thinking about Lydia, their downstairs neighbor who couldn't keep her tongue still for more than a few seconds at a time.

"Therefore," Mrs. Nørby-Henriksen continued and took a large wad of printed cards out of her purse, "we need to insert these warnings into the Free Voice Of Denmark newsletter. Ladies, please take a stack each and use them on your next run."

Vera took the cards offered to her and looked at the drawing on the front: It was a picture of a naked Adam wrestling the snake in the Garden of Eden with the words 'Silence Saves Lives! Informants are more widespread than you think and deadlier than ever,' written next to it.

"All right, let's move on," Rigmor continued and reached back into her purse. "Here's the current edition of the Free Voice, duplicated as usual on low-grade paper. Eight pages of news the Führer and Dr. Best don't want us to know about."

Once again, Mrs. Nørby-Henriksen handed out stacks of the newsletter to the members of the Knitting Club. The front page was dominated by a column listing the New Ten Commandments, ten things Danish patriots should be aware of, like Thou Shalt Always Work Slowly For The Germans, Thou Shalt Destroy Nazi Machinery And Tools Wherever You Find It, Thou Shalt Boycott All Axis Movies And Magazines, and Thou Shalt Give Traitors What They Deserve.

Sussi snickered and pointed at the seventh commandment. "Last week, I actually went into the cinema at the central station to watch the German propaganda newsreel," she said in a dialect that made her sound like the inner-city kid she was. "Lies, lies and more lies. But the German officers with me lapped it up... I'm tellin' you, they practically flew upright and gave the Nazi salute when one of ol' Adolf's speeches was heard."

"Sussi..." Henriette said, shooting the young woman a dark look.

"Naw, I was perfectly safe, Henriette! I was gone before anyone could see me. I got a wallet out of it, too! From a Hauptmann whose schnozz went out to there!" Sussi said, snickering and holding her hand far in front of her face to illustrate her point.
"Well, please don't make it into a habit."

"Ohhhh, I wish you had told me that ten years ago," Sussi said with yet another snicker.

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Clearing his throat to show that he had something he wanted to say, Jørgen Ingvardsen moved to the edge of his chair and looked Henriette in the eye. "Miss Brandt, Miss Holgersen... I wish to apologize for what I said and did down at the central station. I was out of line," he said in his lyrical dialect that was very different from the flat accents spoken by the others. "I'm grateful for the hospitality you've offered me, but it would be inappropriate of me to intrude on your good selves. I have decided to have my base at Birthe's apartment instead. She has family from Funen so I wouldn't sound out of place there."

"I see," Henriette said slightly coolly. "All right, that sounds like a fair solution... if you agree with it, Birthe?"

"Oh, I do! I certainly do," Birthe said, nodding affirmatively.

"Good," Henriette said, moving over to her partner to put a comforting hand on her long back. She was a little miffed over the operative's obvious hostility towards them - not to mention a little worried about his ulterior motives for moving in with Birthe - but she knew the unexpected development would improve Vera's mood greatly, so the long and the short of it was that it was a win-win situation for all involved.

Rigmor Nørby-Henriksen watched the exchange silently, moving her eyes from the operative and over to her two old friends. She had long since guessed the truth about Vera's and Henriette's relationship, but preferred to keep mum about it. "All right, with that out of the way," she said, tapping her spoon on the side of the cup like a toastmaster, "the eleven o'clock curfew will be here sooner than we think and I need to get across the city to go home, so as the last item on the agenda, we need to make a decision on the dates where we'll distribute the Free Voice Of Denmark. Vera?"

"Henriette and I are available whenever you need us, Mrs. Nørby-Henriksen."

"All right," Rigmor said and looked into a small, black notepad. "How about March tenth, March fourteenth and March nineteenth?"

"Suits us just fine, Mrs. Nørby-Henriksen," Henriette said while she kept an eye on Jørgen. The operative's face seemed to have gained a hopeful smirk it hadn't had earlier in the day, and Henriette began to wonder if she needed to give Birthe a little heads-up. 'On the other hand,' she thought, looking back at Birthe, 'Birthe doesn't look any different, so... nah, I better tell her to be careful.'

"Excellent," Mrs. Nørby-Henriksen said and made a coded note with a pencil. "Hippolyta and the Golden Fleece on the tenth, the fourteenth and the nineteenth. Excellent!"

Nodding at Mrs. Nørby-Henriksen, Vera sought out Henriette's hand to give it a little squeeze but was surprised to feel her partner less responsive than usual. Looking up, she caught a glimpse of a dark frown on the blonde's fair face.

At first, she was worried she had been the cause of it, but when she followed Henriette's line of sight, she discovered that she was looking at Jørgen who in turn was looking lustfully at Birthe. 'Well, that didn't take him long! What in the world is going on here?' Vera thought, furrowing her brow.

When Rigmor Nørby-Henriksen closed her purse and rose from the chair, the strategy meeting of the Knitting Club was officially over.
"It's eleven o'clock... the curfew is in place," Henriette whispered into Vera's ear.

Pressed up against a brick facade of an apartment building near the corner of Gammel Kongevej and H.C. Ørstedsvej, the two women were both wearing dark coats, dark shoes and dark hats so they would disappear into the darkness created by the blackout - they even wore very cheap cotton gloves that had been dyed charcoal gray.

The gloves - bought at the pharmacy as an aid against contagious eczema - were a highly effective trick to avoid getting their fingers smeared by the low-grade ink while they held the newspapers; a lesson they had learned the hard way on their very first run.

Vera nodded and took a deep breath. From now on, every vehicle they would meet would be driven by the enemy - it could be one of the HIPO patrols, a regular SD patrol or one of the Danish nightwatchmen.

Everywhere around them, the windows of the apartments overlooking the boulevard had been properly blacked-out though a few streaks of faint light were visible here and there from ill-fitting curtains.

Gulping, Vera reached down to pull her heavy bag further up her shoulder so she could easily reach the many copies of the Free Voice she was carrying. On their twenty-second run in total, it was only the third time they had visited the neighborhood they were in now, and although the first two runs there had been mercifully free of trouble, she knew that dangers could always be lurking around every corner. Swallowing down the bitter taste of worry, she glanced at her lover, praying that nothing would happen to them.

Henriette waved at the two members of the Knitting Club who were standing in the shadows on the other side of the boulevard, Birthe and Jørgen, to get their attention. With another hand signal, she made them aware they should begin distributing the newsletters.

Once Birthe and Jørgen had run through a gateway to an inner courtyard, Henriette reached up and squeezed Vera's shoulder. "Now, love," she whispered.

"Ugh," Vera croaked and stepped away from the shadows. Hunched over, she ran up to a draper's store where the owner had promised to leave the front door unlocked so she could deliver a stack of newsletters. Once she reached the glass door to the shop, she quickly looked up and down the boulevard before slipping inside.

Henriette ran past the shop where Vera had gone in and moved through a gate to get to an inner courtyard. There, they had an arrangement with the caretaker to leave a stack inside the bicycle shed. Though it was pitch black in there, she managed to find the spot and left behind a large wad of newsletters.

Just as Henriette wanted to step back out onto the boulevard, the sound of a car approaching made her fly into the shadows inside the gateway. A dark HIPO sedan drove slowly past her, clearly hoping to find someone breaking the curfew. 'Oh, baby... stay inside... stay inside... stay inside...' she chanted in her mind as the car crept slowly down the boulevard past the store where Vera was hiding.

Henriette's wish came true when the car picked up the pace and drove further down the boulevard. As soon as it was out of sight, she spotted Vera poking her head out of the door to the draper's store to see if the coast was clear.
Drawing a huge sigh of relief, Henriette adjusted the heavy bag and took off further up the boulevard, running in the opposite direction of the sedan.

Vera's breath came in staccato bursts, but she gulped down her terror and followed her partner by hurrying up the boulevard. She was able to see Henriette turn left into the next inner courtyard, but she didn't stop to wait for her. Instead, she moved onto a coffee shop where the owner was a known collaborator. Reaching into the bag, she found one of the cards she had been given by Mrs. Nørby-Henriksen, and threw that and a note saying 'Informants get it in the neck!' into the letterbox.

Moments later, Henriette came running out of the inner courtyard and caught up with Vera. "How's it going?" she whispered, taking her partner by the elbow.

"I'm... I'm all right. Thank you. It's not as easy this time..."

"I agree. Are you up for it?"

Vera wanted to shake her head but knew it would forever paint her as a coward, so she kept still. "Eh. You know..." she whispered, shrugging.

"I do. C'mon, we don't have many stops left," Henriette whispered back before she ran off into the darkness.

Without waiting for her partner, Henriette hurried another hundred yards up the boulevard. There, she tried to depress the handle of a front door to an apartment building. The janitor had recently broken his arm in two places as a result of falling off a ladder, but he had promised he would still accept the Free Voice and distribute it among the tenants.

Sneaking inside, Henriette hurried up a short flight of stairs and knocked very softly on the door to the janitor's apartment. It didn't take long before it was opened, and she quickly went into a hallway, already digging into the heavy bag to take out a wad of newsletters.

Out on the boulevard, Vera had already gone past the building where Henriette had gone in when something happened that made her look up in surprise - the sounds of a squeaking bicycle and drunken singing reached her ears from somewhere ahead of her.

She was standing in front of a dairy that wasn't on her list of subscribers, and when she tried the front door, she found it locked. Caught in a bad spot, she ran into the deepest shadow available to her and pressed herself against a zinc drainpipe.

Seventy yards further up the boulevard, a man wearing what looked to be the typical outfit of a fisherman was driving erratically in the middle of the street. He was utterly unable to control his bicycle that veered wildly first one way, then the other. As he drove past Vera, he tipped his cap at her and shouted for everyone to hear: "Good evenin', Missy! Wanna dance with me?"

"Drunken fool!" Vera said hoarsely, trying to press herself flat against the drainpipe. Much to her consternation, the inebriated man finally fell off his bicycle only a few yards away from her and landed with a thud on the asphalt. If she had thought the impact would silence him, she was wrong.

After an initial, surprised outburst, the man began to laugh loudly and obnoxiously in a stentorian voice that would wake up the entire neighborhood - or worse, make a collaborator call the HIPOs or the SD.

"Stupid idiot," Vera croaked and looked up and down the empty boulevard in terror - sure enough, she could already hear a car roaring towards her, though the man's drunken laughter nearly drowned out the sounds of the car's engine.
"Where's it coming from? Oh God, where's it coming from...?" she said in a thick voice, trying to decide which way she should run.

The boulevard was still empty but the car was clearly getting closer. She suddenly realized the dairy she was standing in front of had two light wells below the store windows, and she hurriedly crouched down to pry open the one closest to her. The heavy, rusty metal grating nearly tore her fingers to shreds in the process, but she managed to get it upright with a few broken fingernails as the worst of her injuries.

Making a snap decision, she took off the carrier bag with the rest of the issues of the Free Voice and threw that and her cotton gloves down into the light well. After lowering the grating, she took off up the boulevard to get away from the approaching car.

Behind her, Henriette stepped back out onto the boulevard after visiting the janitor, but suddenly froze in place, staring with wide open eyes at the drunken, loud fisherman who was still lying in the middle of the street. She could hear the car as well, but the boulevard to her right was empty for several hundred yards.

Whipping her head around to the left, she just caught a faint glimpse of Vera running away, and she knew instinctively that she had gone the wrong way. "Oh God, no... that's the- that's the wrong way, Vera!" she croaked, clenching her fists so hard her cheap gloves nearly burst at the seams.

Vera's luck ran out almost at once. As she hurried up to the next corner of the boulevard, the HIPO sedan that had gone the other way earlier came blasting across the intersection and stopped with a screech just in front of her.

The two HIPOs who were sitting in the back seat quickly jumped out of the car and waved a pistol and a submachine gun in her face.

For a split second, she thought about fleeing but she knew they wouldn't hesitate shooting her in the back. Pressing her lips together, she threw her arms in the air and froze in place on the sidewalk, staring with wide open eyes at the men.

"You're under arrest for breaking the curfew. Get in the car! Get in the car, now!" the first of the two men barked in Danish as he grabbed Vera's arm and dragged her over to the idling sedan with no regard for her comfort.

Both men wore black uniforms and hobnailed boots that clacked harshly on the pavement, but all Vera could see were the barrels of their firearms that reflected the faint light to create a nightmarish vision of quick death.

Though both in their mid-thirties, the HIPOs were quite different - one was overweight and swarthy, and the other tall and blond - but their mannerisms proved they were people who shouldn't be messed with.

The swarthy one shoved Vera so roughly onto the back seat of the sedan that she bumped her knee quite hard against the pillar at the door. The pain that shot up from it was a stark reminder that she was in real trouble, but even that faded into the background when the men sat down on either side of her and pinned her down with their elbows to remove any chance she had of escape.

"The Colonel's gotta see this one... go!" the blond one said to the driver who instantly made a U-turn.

"What about the other fella? The drunken one?" the driver said and pointed out of the windshield at the fisherman who was still singing on the pavement.

"Forget him," the swarthy one said, "he'll only puke in the car. We can call the SD when we get back to base."

Nodding affirmatively, the driver hit the gas which sent the sedan flying up the boulevard.
Pale as a sheet, Vera stared straight ahead with her lips pressed together and her nostrils flaring in fear. She knew she'd burst into tears if she made as much as a peep, and she didn't want to give the HIPOs that pleasure. The only consolation was that she'd had time to get rid of the newsletters. If they had caught her red-handed, she would have been face-down in her own blood by now, she thought, as the sedan blasted across another intersection towards the HIPO stationhouse.

The dizzying speed of the car and the strong odors of her captors and their weapons nearly made her gag, but she swallowed it and forced herself to clear her mind of all the horrible tales she had heard of what the HIPOs did to the people they arrested or suspected of working with the resistance movement.

Henriette walked out onto the boulevard like in a trance. She had watched everything but couldn't fathom any of it. Though Birthe and Jørgen came running towards her from the other side of the street, all she could hear was her own heart galloping in her chest, and all she could feel was her soul being torn to shreds, piece by bloody piece.

The bag she wore over her shoulder suddenly weighed a ton and it was enough to make her knees buckle. Crouching down, she touched the pavement with her black gloves while she tried to penetrate the veil of insanity in her brain that screamed in her ear that Vera had been taken by the HIPOs.

A crying Birthe was at her side in an instant and tried to help her up. It was hard going, but she eventually got on her feet and began to struggle back down the boulevard.

"We gotta get you somewhere safe, Henriette," Birthe said in a choked-up voice. "They'll make her talk... you won't be safe at home..."

Henriette clearly heard Vera's old friend speaking to her, but she didn't understand a word of the message. Instead, she just shook her head slowly and picked up the pace so they could clear the area before the incident attracted even more attention.

Only then did she notice that the drunken fisherman was suddenly lying very still and that Jørgen was kneeling next to him.

When she staggered past the fisherman, she could see by the relaxed, vacant look on his face that he had died from an unseen force. She glanced over at Jørgen in time to see the operative put something into his pocket, but she didn't care enough to ask what he had done to the drunken man - nothing mattered now that Vera was gone.

The sedan came to a screeching halt a kilometer up H.C. Ørsted's vej in front of the building that had housed the party headquarters for the Social Democrats before the war. The four-storey brick building had been converted into a stationhouse and private quarters for the HIPOs that came from the local neighborhood.

Without speaking a word, the swarthy guard squeezed Vera's upper arm brutally and dragged her out of the car. The blond HIPO was right behind them, poking the tip of his submachine gun into Vera's back.

Other HIPO men were loitering in front of the building and more than a few of them offered lewd comments or whistles at the sight of the tall, shapely woman.

Because she was being pulled by her arm, Vera fumbled and stumbled up a short flight of stone steps to the double door-entrance, but it didn't make the swarthy guard slow down at all.
Inside, the brutal guard pushed her up against a wall and waited for his blond colleague to catch up with them. Once the other guard reached them, the swarthy one went over to the watch desk and picked up a receiver. Looking back at his prisoner, he began to dial a number. "Guten abend, this is HIPO station six," he said in broken German once the connection had been established, "we need to report a disturbance near the corner of Gammel Kongevej and H.C. Ørstedsvæj. A drunken man in the middle of the street and a woman in dark clothes. We got the woman but didn't have room for the man ... Yes ... All right."

Hanging up, he went back to the blond guard and Vera and flashed her an unpleasant, rat-like smile. "The SD will take care of your drunken friend," he said in Danish in a flat, inner-city accent that held no warmth at all. "Or husband, or whatever. Let's have a little chat, eh? I see interrogation room four is available. That's my favorite."

Now they were standing in the light of the corridor, Vera could tell by the hard, villainous faces of the two guards who had arrested her that she had been doubly unlucky. The men weren't inexperienced younglings but hardened criminals who were no strangers to delivering pain or even death. In a moment of clarity, she thought she recognized the blond one from a murder trial before the war - not that it really mattered.

The swarthy man's cold eyes made Vera frantically gulp down the terrors that threatened to send the contents of her stomach all over the floor. Looking around in a haze of ice cold fear, she noted the floor was smooth, dark green linoleum and that the corridor they were in was painted tan with a few white highlights. The face of Adolf Hitler and a few other high-ranking Nazis from Denmark and the Third Reich were staring back at her from picture frames on the walls next to a Nazi flag and the HIPO skull and bones banner.

"Come on," the swarthy guard said before he grabbed Vera around her upper arm and dragged her down the corridor to interrogation room four.

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Henriette's hands were trembling too much to hit the keyhole so Birthe snatched the keys and unlocked the door. Birthe and Jørgen rushed inside to dispose of any evidence of their involvement, but Henriette kept standing in the hallway, leaning against one of Vera's coats to inhale her partner's distinct scent.

She was deathly pale and hardly able to breathe, but she managed to stagger into the living room where she stared dumbstruck at the other people who were running around frantically.

"Miss Brandt, for God's sake," Jørgen said, holding a stack of papers. "Get to it! Get what you need and let's get out of here! Once we're done, we'll soak everything in accelerant and torch the-"

"What? The hell you will! This is my home!" Henriette barked and shot forward towards the operative with her fists up.

"Henriette..." Birthe tried, but she knew at once that she was ignored.

"Miss Brandt," Jørgen said in a voice that showed very clearly what he thought of the Knitting Club, "by now, the HIPOs will have questioned Miss Holgersen. She'll have been beaten and possibly whipped... she'll have had her breasts and her genitals burnt with cigarettes, she'll have been-"

"Listen, you son of a bitch," Henriette barked and grabbed hold of Jørgen's dark suit, "if you-"

"Get your hands off me, crazy woman!" Jørgen hissed and tried to free himself from Henriette's strong grip but, her fire overpowered his strength.

The feeble rescue attempt only made Henriette grab Jørgen harder and move even closer to his average face. "If you don't stop talkin' shit right this minute, I swear to God I'm gonna punch your lights out!"
"My God, what kind of freak are you, woman?" the operative said angrily.

"Freak?" - Almost like she was daring the others to make a comeback to her angry words, Henriette stared fiercely at the operative and then over at Birthe who shied back from the intensity of the emerald green glare. "That's it, you're not welcome here any longer! Either of you! You hear me? Get the hell out while you can still walk! Vera is strong... there's no way she'll have betrayed us... even if... if they've d- done those things to her..."

"They have, mark my words," Jørgen said darkly, finally freeing himself from the grip when she let up ever so slightly. "I give them twenty-five minutes tops, then the HIPOs will have several squads breaking down your door. Or perhaps they'll have called the Gestapo... if they have, you can kiss everything goodbye, you fool!"

"Watch your mouth, jerk! And what did you do to that poor drunken man? How did you kill him? Do you have a switchblade in your pocket?"

"No," Jørgen said coolly, reaching into his pocket to retrieve a fountain pen.

"What the hell is that? You killed him with your pen?"

"Yes. Because instead of ink, this pen holds cyanide. All operatives have one. It contains three capsules and I gave him one... it didn't take him ten seconds to die," Jørgen said as he put the - quite literally - poisonous pen back into his pocket.

Henriette took a short step back and stared wide-eyed at the operative. "But... why?"

"Why? Because in his drunken state, he wouldn't have been able to keep quiet about what he had seen, that's why. He saw Miss Holgersen and possibly yourself wearing your shoulder bags. He may not have known what was in them, but the Germans certainly do. If he had told them about the bags, they could have connected you to the resistance... now, all they have is your queer lover and she's only there for breaking the curfew."

The words had to sink in first, but once they were, Henriette scrunched up her face into a mask of rage and flew back into Jørgen's space. "That's it, you miserable bastard... get your ass out of here now! Do you want me to kick you out? Now means now! You hear me? Now!"

While all that had been going on, Birthe had been wringing her hands in desperation, but the aggression in the room and her own despair over Vera's arrest finally got to her and she burst into tears and began to cry at the top of her voice.

"Oh, that's the absolute last thing I needed," Henriette said and rubbed her temples. When she realized Jørgen still hadn't left her apartment, she grabbed him by the lapels and dragged him across the living room floor. In the narrow hallway, she opened the front door, shoved him outside and slammed the door shut in his face.

The action didn't do anything to ease Birthe's crying, in fact, it only made it worse when it appeared to dawn on her she would be the next to be thrown out. Sobbing, she reached down to take some of the things she had gathered. Despite her raging temper, Henriette felt sorry for Vera's old friend and decided to pull her into a crushing embrace to make it better. Soon, the taller woman cried into Henriette's grip, creating a large, wet spot on the shoulder of her dark coat. "There, there, Birthe... I know this is a really bad situation... b- but Vera is going to be fine. I just know she is," she said and took a step back from the crying woman. "I can feel her in my heart... she's right here, and she's telling me she's fine. Can't you feel her?" Henriette continued, holding both hands across her heart.

Birthe shook her head and wiped her nose on the back of her hand.
"I can," Henriette continued strongly, "and she's fine." - 'But if she isn't, I'll kill every last one of those Nazi pigs myself...' she thought, pushing those dark thoughts as far down as they would go.

"Now what?" Birthe croaked, finding a handkerchief that she blew her nose into.

Henriette sighed deeply and ran her hands through her hair. "I don't know. I honestly don't know. I'm almost positive they took her to the stationhouse down on H.C. Ørstedsvæj... you know, where the worker's party used to be."

"I don't know where that is..."

"Sure you do. It's only... only... wait," Henriette suddenly said, running over to the window. Peeking out next to the blackout curtains, she checked the street thoroughly but couldn't see any Germans or HIPOS. "It's only ten minutes away by bicycle. If I, ahem, borrow one of the bikes from the bicycle storage room, I could be there in no time... I could be near her..." she said in a voice that trailed off into nothing as she pondered the idea.

"God no, Henriette... they'll arrest you too!" Birthe said and grabbed hold of Henriette's elbow, but the blonde already wore a look of steely determination on her face.

"If they do, so be it," Henriette said decisively. "Birthe, you can't stay here. Take the things you've already gathered and get out... go home and lie low for a few days. All right? And stay away from that miserable piece of... so-and-so. Please!"

"I... well, I... we're actually... all right. All right," Birthe said and hurriedly began to scoop up the few things she had found, not wanting to press her luck by saying to Henriette that she and Jørgen had become lovers.

Meanwhile, Henriette had put on her favorite beret and pulled it well down to cover her long, white-blonde hair.

"Ready?"

When Birthe nodded, Henriette nodded back and guided the sobbing woman out of the apartment. Closing the door behind them, she stopped to look into the dark hallway at the clothes and all the other things she had to leave behind. 'I wonder if I'll ever see this place again... God, I hope so... it means so much to Vera and me,' she thought, shaking her head slowly.

Sighing, she locked the door and hurried down the stairs.

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Vera nodded, looking down at the scratched wooden table that was one of only three pieces of furniture in interrogation room four - the other two were the chairs she and the swarthy guard were sitting on. The room was barely larger than a broom cupboard, and the stench of sweat and fear was so strong Vera could hardly breathe. A single, naked light bulb that cast a faintly pale orange light over the proceedings hung down from the ceiling and added to the surreal atmosphere.

She'd had her hands tied together behind her back with a steel chain that cut into her wrists, but that had been all they had done to her so far, and for that, she was silently grateful.

"Look at me when I speak to you!" the guard thundered, slamming his fist into the wooden table.
Jumping up in fear, Vera looked straight into the man's ugly, hard face.

"Now that's better. Especially when it's such a pretty girl such as yourself," the guard said and reached into his pocket to find a pack of Powhattan cigarettes and a lighter. "Is that your current address?"

"Y- yes, that's where I live, S- Sir..."

"What will we find when we search it?"

"N- nothing, Sir..."

"Not even the radio tuned in to the BBC?"

"N- no, Sir... it's tuned to the state broadcasting service," Vera mumbled, knowing that it wasn't even a lie.

"Mmmm! You were apprehended for breaking the curfew nearly a kilometer away from your home. Why were you there?" While the guard was speaking, he lit a cigarette and made sure the glowing end was nice and red.

"I w- wanted to visit someone, Sir..."

"Who?"

"A boyfriend, Sir."

"Did you get to see him?"

"N- no, Sir... you came before I c- could-"

"His name and address. Now," the guard said, tapping his knuckles on the table while the pale blue smoke rose from his cigarette.

Vera's brain nearly short-circuited at the prospect of remembering an address she could use in the lie, and as a result, she began to stutter and stammer. "U- Uh... Ni- Niels-Christian Jensen. Gammel Kongevej, th- the, uh... I d- don't know the ad- address, Sir... he's... he's... he works in the coffee shop! I j- just go to the coffee shop..." she said, hoping the mention of the German-friendly bar would be enough to appease the guard.

"The coffee shop... the Polar Bear coffee shop?" the swarthy man said and furrowed his brow. Smirking, he rose from the chair and slowly slid behind Vera. "I don't think so," he continued with the cigarette in the corner of his mouth bobbing dangerously close to Vera's hair and her right ear.

Moving casually, he reached down to twist the screw on the manacles another turn to the right, cutting off even more of the blood flow to Vera's hands.

The pain that shot up from her arms made her grimace in fear and she began to shake from the strain on her nerves. She had heard so many stories about what the HIPOs could do to make someone talk, but she hadn't wanted to believe them - now it looked like she would find out for herself.

"Do you know why I don't think your boyfriend is working at the coffee shop?" the guard said and moved Vera's hair aside so he had a clear view of her neck. "It's because there isn't anyone there under the age of sixty. And quite frankly, a woman of your looks won't have any problems attracting young men. No. You lied to me. But why? I can't wait to find out."
Vera knew the second she felt her hair being swept aside that something horrible was going to happen to her. She could almost sense the glowing end of the smelly cigarette burn her skin, and as she tried to shy back from it, she prayed it would be swift.

Tapping some ash off the cigarette, the guard took a long pull and moved the cigarette down towards Vera's exposed neck, but before it could make contact, the interrogation was interrupted by commotion and loud, insistent voices out in the corridor.

*Knock, knock!*

"Not now!" the swarthy guard barked, but the door was still swooshed open.

Vera's heart leaped with joy at being spared the torture, but her relief lasted all of three seconds - then she looked up and caught a glimpse of a German Officer's cap and silvery ribbons on a dark gray uniform.

The blond HIPO who had been part of Vera's arrest barely had time to open his mouth before he was pushed aside by two uniformed soldiers from the SD.

The swarthy guard stared wide-eyed at the two soldiers, an Obersturmführer and a Corporal who was holding a rifle. "What the hell...?" the HIPO stuttered, not used to having anyone interrupt his favorite pastime.

"I'm Obersturmführer-SD Horst Greinert. The woman comes with us," the Officer said in German, pointing at Vera. In his early thirties, the man was slender and wiry, and there was no mistaking the no-nonsense look in his gray eyes. Like so many of his colleagues at the SD, his cap was slightly acocked and it had the skull-and-bones symbol placed prominently just above the peak.

"Just you wait a damn minute..." the guard said in Danish before he realized the Officer wouldn't be able to understand him.

"Now," the Obersturmführer said, nodding at the Corporal who quickly entered interrogation room four and crouched down behind Vera to untie the steel manacles.

The swarthy guard scrunched up his face and shot an angry, evil look at the men who dared to get between him and a prisoner. "Now look here, Herr Obersturmführer," he said in broken German, "this woman was arrested by us! We have a right to speak to her first!"

"No, you don't," the Officer said as he watched his Corporal help a shell-shocked, trembling Vera up from the wooden chair. "The drunken man you sent us to pick up was dead when we arrived. When my men detected a faint smell of almonds through the stench of alcohol, they called me. Need I remind you that cyanide smells like almonds? Need I remind you that the resistance movement often uses cyanide to silence witnesses and collaborators?"

"We busted her for breaking the curfew! She doesn't have a damn thing to do with the resistance!" the swarthy guard said angrily, waving his hand at Vera who was rubbing her wrists to get the numbness to go away.

The Obersturmführer shrugged and took Vera harshly by the upper arm. "We'll see," he said and dragged her out of the room with the Corporal in tow.

Vera only had a split second to glance over her shoulder at the man who had so nearly tortured her. She was relieved to get away from the sadistic, swarthy HIPO, but as the two Germans marched on either side of her down the corridor to get to their waiting car, she knew with a sinking feeling in her gut that she had merely gone from the frying pan and into the fire.
She was able to get down the stone steps outside the HIPO stationhouse without any problems, mostly because the Obersturmführer gave her room to do so. The other HIPOs that were standing outside shot the German soldiers dark looks, but knew better than to interfere, or even say anything.

The Officer pulled Vera over to a large, dark van and kept an extra-tight grip on her arm as he opened the rear doors. "Get in. Sit on the bench on the right," he said harshly in German, pushing Vera up into the rear of the van before stepping up himself to supervise that she was doing what she had been told.

Behind them, the Corporal stepped up as well and pulled Vera's hands behind her back to tie them to a pair of handcuffs that were hanging from a chain on the inside wall of the van.

The Obersturmführer grunted and stepped back out onto the street. With a last look at Vera, he slammed the rear doors shut, leaving the two people inside sitting in the faint light from the two rows of interior lights in the ceiling.

After having checked the handcuffs were tight, the Corporal sat down on the bench opposite Vera and stared passively at his prisoner.

Vera could hear one of the van's doors open, then close. A few words were exchanged in German followed moments later by the engine starting. The van drove off with a jerk, first performing a U-turn and then turning left almost at once.

In the wall separating the cab from the cargo compartment, a narrow slit was pulled to the side and the Obersturmführer's eyes became visible. Once he had checked that everything was in order, the slit was pulled shut again.

The vibrations of driving along the exceptionally bumpy city streets jerked Vera around on the hard bench and exacerbated the bruising the HIPO manacles had already given her wrists. When they hit a particularly deep pothole, she thought her left hand had been ripped off her arm by the force, and she couldn't keep down a pained cry.

Trembling and pressing her lips firmly together, she stared down at her shoes, trying desperately to clear her mind of Henriette and what she had to be going through at that moment. Too late - the blonde appeared in her mind's eye. Henriette was laughing and holding out her arms almost like she wanted to pull Vera into a hug. Vera could suddenly smell her partner's natural scent and the lavender soap she used, she could feel her partner's silky smooth skin beneath her fingertips, and she could hear the rich, husky laugh that always held promises of long, wonderful nights spent in each other's arms.

The sensations sent a ripple of ice cold terror through Vera's system, a jolt that shook her entire being to the core and sent her a clear message that she would most likely never see Henriette again.

Her chin started to quiver and her eyes welled up. Despite her best efforts to hold it back, she was unable to control her fears and anxiety any longer. When the tears came, they came hard, and she broke down in heartfelt sobs while the large, salty drops stained the van's dusty floor around her feet.

Unknown to Vera, the very object of her thoughts had come to a screeching halt on her stolen men's bicycle just in time to see the very familiar figure of a tall, dark-haired woman pushed up into the back of an SD van.

Henriette had broken all the rules of safe behavior during the curfew, but she didn't care. She had pedaled the stolen bicycle the fastest she could to get to the HIPO stationhouse without actually knowing what she would - or even could - do once she got there.
Now, panting hard from the exertion, she watched how a German officer clad in the typical dark gray uniform of the SD or the SS slammed the rear doors shut and climbed up into the cab.

"Oh God, love..." she croaked, wiping her sweaty brow with a trembling hand. "God, please let her be unharmed... please let her be- Oh!"

Just as Henriette was watching, the van made a U-turn and drove back down H.C. Ørstedsvej. Gasping, she scrambled into the shadows of a nearly gateway to wait for it to drive past, but when it didn't, she immediately popped her head back out to look for it.

Instead of driving back on H.C. Ørstedsvej, the van had turned onto Danasvej and was moving away fast; its single red taillight growing fainter and fainter as it drove along the bumpy street.

"Oh God, no..." Henriette mumbled as she scrambled to get back on the stolen bicycle to follow the SD van. "I know where they're taking her... she's going to the Shell House... to the Gestapo..."

She clenched her teeth and set off after the van that had all but disappeared in the darkness. At first, she took a shortcut to stay out of sight of the HIPO stationhouse, but she was soon pedaling hard in the middle of the street to keep up with the glowing red taillight in the far distance.

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CHAPTER 5

Tuesday, March 20th, 1945 - twenty to one, A.M.

Henriette came home with a heavy heart and a sore rear from working so hard on a strange bicycle. Her conjecture had been right, the SD van had stopped at the Shell House - or rather, at the roadblock in front of it.

After one of the sentries had spoken to the officer in the cab, a large gate to the inner courtyard had been opened. The van had turned around and driven through the gate, ending up out of sight of Henriette who had been pressing herself up against the wall of a building on the opposite side of the street, well out of the way of the many guards and sentries that controlled the perimeter of the Gestapo headquarters.

Blinking a few times, Henriette returned to the present. She found herself standing in front of her apartment building on Stempsgade, but she didn’t dare go upstairs. Everything seemed quiet, but she knew looks could be deceiving.

She was still hemming and hawing over what to do when a sedan from the HIPO corps drove past out on the boulevard. She hoped they hadn't seen her, but she didn't want to press her luck and swiftly moved into the stairwell with the bicycle she had stolen.

Out of sheer habit, she checked the notice board next to the door to see if the janitor had left any messages she should be aware of, but the board was empty.

She needed to go downstairs into the bicycle storage basement anyway to put back her iron steed where she had taken it, but as she walked down the short flight of stairs, an idea formed in her mind.

"If the Germans do come, would they look into the storage rooms down here? Hmmm... they probably would... at least some of them. I would be insane to hide in our own room, but Mrs. Thorbjørnson's may be safe... I'll bet I could sleep in there," she thought as she wheeled the bicycle over to the wall where she had found it. It was as good as new.
so she didn't feel a need to leave the owner a letter thanking for its use - and besides, she didn't even know who it belonged to.

On her way back to the row of storage rooms that ran the length of the basement - there were ten pea-green, wooden doors in all, one for each apartment in the stairwell - she held her breath to listen for any unusual sounds in the building, but everything was as quiet as a tomb.

Nodding, she sneak ed over to the storage room that was labeled 'Poul and Lydia Thorbjørnson' and depressed the old-fashioned door handle that hadn't been changed since the building had been built in the 1890s. The door was unlocked like she had expected it to be. From speaking to Lydia, she knew their downstairs neighbor didn't keep anything valuable down there and therefore didn't bother to invest in a padlock.

Before she went inside, she briefly glanced at her own storage room, but a mere glimpse of the note that proclaimed it to be the room belonging to 'Henriette Brandt and Vera Holgersen' was enough to make her stomach clench hard. Gulping down a sour surge, she moved into Lydia's storage room and closed the door behind her.

On top of smelling of mothballs and mold, it was pitch black in there, and it didn't take three seconds before she whacked her shin against something hard on her way over to the bench she knew was at the back wall. Another step produced another whack, this time to her ankle, so she had no choice but to seek the metal chain she knew would be hanging down from a single light bulb roughly in the center of the storage room's roof.

It was easily found and pulled, but the mess that became visible in the harsh light from the naked bulb made her wish she had thought of something else to try - the storage room was filled to the brim with all kinds of items, like discarded garden furniture, suitcases with metal edges, stacks of summer clothes, books, books and more books, and finally what appeared to be an old chest of drawers with a flat top that had been put exactly where she had expected to sleep.

Sighing, Henriette quickly shoved some of the things aside to dig a clear path to the chest. A few probing knocks and taps proved it was far too heavy for her to push away, but also that it was sturdy enough to risk sleeping on without ending up buried inside it.

"Huh... pillow? What can I use for a pillow... and a blanket? Oh... Lydia's summer clothes," Henriette said and grabbed a pile of slightly moldy summer garments. "I'm sure she won't mind," she continued, fluffing the pile into something resembling a pillow. A table cloth was pressed into service as a blanket, and soon, the chest of drawers entered a second career as a bunk bed.

"All right... well, there's a first for everything, I s'pose," she mumbled and inched her way back to the light bulb's metal chain. Once she had pulled it, she waited a minute to allow her eyes to adjust to the darkness, and then she shuffled back to the chest of drawers.

Many hours later, Henriette awoke with such a start that she nearly fell off the chest of drawers. She had actually managed to get a few hours of sleep on the hard, uncomfortable surface, but her neck was so stiff she could hardly move her head.

She looked around in a panic, certain she had heard glass breaking. A few strands of daylight shone through the cracks in the wooden door, so she surmised it was in the early hours of the morning. Even as she was watching the door, the daylight suddenly dimmed like a figure had moved past the cracks and blocked out the light.

Henriette's breath hitched and she forced herself to keep quiet. Moving very slowly, she moved the table cloth aside and swung her legs over the side of the chest to sit up. Nothing further happened outside, but when she jumped down onto the dusty floor, her shoes landed on glass fragments that crunched so loudly it sounded like thunder.
'He- hello?' a young, male voice said from somewhere outside.

Henriette scrunched up her face and looked down to find the source of the glass that definitely hadn't been there when she had gone to sleep. The evidence was readily at hand, but it took her a little while to realize she had to have accidentally knocked down an old, discarded oil lamp from a perch just next to where she'd had her arms. The glass dome had cracked and was distributed liberally all over the floor.

'Hello? Is anyone in there? Ha- ha- hands up if- if there is!' the male voice said, and Henriette recognized it as belonging to Jens, the teenager who lived in one of the other apartments.

Tip-toeing past the broken glass, she put her ear to the door to listen for other voices or footsteps that could come from nobnailed boots worn by the Germans or the HIPOs. When she couldn't hear anything, she depressed the handle and peeked outside.

Jens was already on his way up the short flight of stairs with his bicycle, but when he heard the door creak open, he dropped the bike, spun around and ran back down into the storage room. "Hands up! Hande Hock!" he said, mangling the German term.

"They're up, they're up," Henriette said and inched out of the storage room with her hands duly waving in the air. Once outside, she realized just how smelly it had been in there, and she took a very deep breath to cleanse her sinuses of the stench of mothballs and mold.

"Miss Brandt?!" Jens said, staring in disbelief at the blonde woman in the dark clothes - or rather, the horrendously dusty dark clothes that seemed to have been a breeding ground for dust bunnies.

"Yeah, it's me," Henriette said and closed the door to Lydia's storage room. "Say, what time is it?"

"Ten past seven, Miss Brandt... but... I mean... what are you doing down here? Why aren't you upstairs in your apartment?" Jens said, pushing his fancy flat cap aside to scratch his neck.

The young man was dressed for work, wearing brown, reinforced boots and a blue boiler suit. In his hand, he held a white envelope without stamps or a return address.

Henriette took a deep breath and let it out slowly, pondering how much she should tell the young, honest man. In the end, she decided to only unveil a snippet of the night's events. "Vera was taken by the Germans last night, Jens."

"Golly! Why?"

"She broke the curfew. Do you know if they've been here? Or if there have been any German cars parked nearby?"

"Well, they've definitely not been here, Miss Brandt. It's been quiet all night," Jens said and waved the white envelope around. "But cars... I don't know... I haven't been out on the street yet. Do you want me to check for you?"

"No, thank you. I'll... I'll do that myself. What's that you've got there?" Henriette said, pointing at the letter.

"Oh! Oh, golly gee, I forgot all about that!" Jens said and slapped his forehead. "This is for you! It was lying upstairs on your doormat. I tried to ring your door bell, but no one answered... then I went down here to get my bicycle. I was going to pin it to the door of your storage room, but I didn't have anyth-"

Henriette didn't even let Jens finish before she had snatched the envelope out of his hands. Staring at it, she could see it was addressed to her and that her name was written in a very common hand. She quickly tore it open to read the single paragraph,
'Ares will have defeated Hippolyta. Queen Malaïs invites you to a feast at her court to ponder the consequences. King Midas.'

"King Midas! Who does he think he is, that narrow-minded, miserable..." Henriette growled, crumbling up the note and stuffing it into her coat pocket.

"Who's King Midas?" Jens said, scratching his head. "The only Midas I know of is the old Greek fellow, uh... who, uh... had something with a sword over his head or something..."

"No, that wasn't him, Jens. King Midas was the man with the golden touch."

"Oh, right!"

"Right indeed," Henriette growled. The note had told her to come to Mrs. Nørby-Henriksen's house on Viborggade as soon as possible, but it would take her too long to ride there on a bicycle, so she rummaged through her pockets to find a few tokens she could use for the tram.

After finding what she needed as well as a five kroner note, she looked up at the tall teen and offered him a smile. "Thanks for your help, Jens. I appreciate it. I need to go somewhere now, but... tell you what, you've earned yourself a little something. Here," she said, handing Jens the five kroner note.

"Oh, but I..."

"It's yours. I wouldn't have read the note if you hadn't brought it here. Keep the money."

"Thanks, Miss Brandt! Golly, I better be going or else I'm gonna be late for work... the master is already on my back, so..."

"Jens, one more thing before you go," Henriette said and put her hand on the teen's strong arm.

"Uh... yeah?"

"You didn't talk to me this morning. In fact, you didn't see me... because I wasn't even here. All right?"

Jens furrowed his brow and looked at the blonde who had dark circles under her eyes and a grayish complexion instead of her regular fair looks. Understanding what she meant, he nodded solemnly before wheeling his bicycle out of the storage room.

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The trip to Østerbro turned out to be long and exhausting for Henriette. To keep her back clear, she changed trams three times out of fear of being followed - she even went two stops too far at her destination to throw off any possible tails.

On the tram and on the street, several people offered her their condolences because they thought her dark clothes and haggard looks came from her recently becoming a widow. Each time it happened, she smiled back and uttered a mumbled "Thank you," but the vice around her heart turned ever tighter. She couldn't keep the thought out of her mind there was a genuine risk she would indeed be a widow before too long.

Like always, she walked with unhurried yet determined steps along the sidewalk, looking down at the pavement so she wouldn't attract attention to herself.
It was just after nine when she made it to Mrs. Nørby-Henriksen's house on the fashionable Viborggade. At first, she crossed the street to get away from the stately home that was drawn back and separated from the sidewalk by several good-sized bushes and trees.

On the other side of the street, she looked with great interest at the four shops that were there side by side, a shoemaker, a dairy, a tobacconist and finally a draper's store. The large window in the shoemaker's shop reflected everything from Viborggade and gave her a perfect opportunity to look behind while looking ahead. After spending five minutes at the store, she decided she wasn't being followed.

She turned around with a sigh and crossed the street again, hurrying between a few bicyclists and a horse-driven flatbed carriage to get to the other side in one piece. The cast iron gate to the stately home's garden was heavy, but it was nothing she couldn't handle. She quickly moved up to the scullery door at the back of the white, two-storey building and knocked in the pre-arranged sequence.

A few moments later, the door was opened by Jørgen Ingvardsen whose face proved he hadn't forgiven Henriette for the things she had said and done to him in her apartment the night before. "Are you alone?" he said surly, glancing down the garden path. Like Henriette, he was still wearing the same clothes he had worn during the night.

"No, I ran into a regiment of Monty's boys from El Alamein and asked 'em to come along, Jørgen. Of course I'm alone!" Henriette said and barged past the operative to get into the stately home.

"We can't be too cautious, Miss Brandt," Jørgen said and suddenly pressed a small-caliber pistol into Henriette's back.

Feeling the hard steel poking her in the ribs made Henriette take in a deep, gasping breath. When she realized what was happening, she slowly put her hands in the air. The next thing she knew, she was pressed up against one of the walls of the hallway while Jørgen frisked her, patting her down so thoroughly that no part of her was left untouched, breasts and other private parts included.

Once Jørgen stepped back, Henriette spun around and clenched her fists at the operative. "Was that good for you, you son of a bitch? What the hell do you think you're doing?" she said in a low, menacing voice.

"The others are in the cellar," Jørgen said and put his pistol into his jacket pocket. As he moved to turn around, he was stopped by a strong hand on his chest.

Grabbing hold of Jørgen's lapels, Henriette clenched her fists which made the fabric crumple up into a ball. "I said, what the hell do you think you're doing?"

For the first few seconds, Jørgen simply stared at her with barely hidden disgust in his brown eyes and on his featureless face. Then he reached up to calmly pry her hands off his suit. "I'm just doing my job, Miss Brandt. If others had been doing their job as well, we would have had far fewer problems." With that, he moved over to a door to the cellar and held it open. "Like I said, the others are waiting for you in the cellar."

Henriette growled from somewhere deep in her throat but eventually stomped through the door and down a narrow, steep staircase.

"Oh, Henriette! We were so worried about you," Birthe cried the moment Henriette set foot in the cellar. At once, Vera's old friend jumped up from the bench she had been sitting on to pull Henriette into a hug.

"You know I'm a survivor," Henriette said into Birthe's crumpled coat.

The cellar they were in had been used for wines and other quality goods before the war, but Mrs. Nørby-Henriksen had converted it into a bomb shelter with room for ten when Germany invaded Poland in September 1939. The
crypt-like cellar had a domed roof that should in theory dispel the shockwaves created by bombs or artillery shells, but thankfully - the theory had never been tested.

Two benches on either side of the room provided the seating, and a pile of boxes containing canned goods and other supplies would provide the nourishment if the bomb shelter was ever pressed into the service it was designed for. At the far end of the room stood a small table with a lit candle, a regular radio tuned to the BBC, and an antenna that zig-zagged its way upwards and across the ceiling.

Humorously, on the wall opposite the pile of canned goods, the original wine rack was still in use, though there were only a few bottles left after five years of war.

"I do know you're a survivor," Birthe said and hooked an arm inside Henriette's, "but the Germans won't care. Oh, we're so glad to see you safe. All of us," she continued, waving her free hand at Sussi and Mrs. Nørby-Henriksen who were - for a change - not talking about someone doing something to someone else. Instead, they were looking at Henriette with mixed emotions clearly written on their faces.

"Hello, Sussi. Mrs. Nørby-Henriksen," Henriette said, sitting down next to the young pickpocket.

"Hello, dear," Rigmor Nørby-Henriksen said, nodding somberly.

"Hi," Sussi said quietly, putting a hand on Henriette's arm, "Oh, Miss Brandt, I'm so sorry to hear about Vera..."

A sad smile spread over Henriette's face as she looked at the pretty girl who appeared even younger than her twenty-two years. She knew that Sussi's parents had long since abandoned her, leaving her to fight her own battles on the tough inner-city streets, and she felt it gave herself and Vera an odd kinship with Sussi simply because they had all fought endlessly to get to where they were. "Thank you, Sussi," she said in a whisper, not trusting her voice enough to speak in a normal tone.

Behind them, Jørgen Ingvardsen moved quietly down the narrow staircase. Once he was on the floor, he leaned against the far wall of the bomb shelter and crossed his arms over his chest.

It didn't take long before Henriette sensed the operative's eyes burning two holes in the back of her head, and it made her thump her fist down onto her thigh and spin around on the bench. "Oh, what the hell is the matter with you?" she said in a growl.

"Nothing," Jørgen said, buffing his fingernails on his jacket. "I just can't fathom why the Germans haven't picked you up yet. That's why I frisked you so thoroughly before. I figured the only reason you were allowed to walk freely would be if you had offered them us in exchange for your queer lover."

Henriette felt the fiery volcano inside her close to eruption over the operative's words, so she closed her eyes and counted to ten, to twenty and finally to thirty. When it didn't help, she opened her eyes and stared him down with a strong dose of emerald green fire. "The next time you use that expression, Mister, you're going to marvel at how far my knee can be pushed up into your groin."

Birthe merely winced at the verbal sparring match between her lover and one of her best friends, but Sussi guffawed loudly and punched the air in delight. "Whaddaya have to say to that, buster?" she exclaimed, thumbing her nose at Jørgen.

"Nothing," Jørgen said and pushed himself off the wall. "My work here is done. I have sent my final report to the SOE. I shall leave you tonight."
Amidst surprised and even emotional outbursts from the others, Henriette scrunched up her face and studied the operative's average face that still didn't hold any emotions apart from a faint look of disgust. "Hmmm," she said so quietly she was the only one who could hear it.

"But Jørgen..." Birthe said and shot up from the bench, clearly caught unaware of her lover's plans. Running towards him, she nearly jumped into his arms to sort out the mess.

Henriette grunted and looked back at Sussi and Mrs. Nørby-Henriksen to give her friend some privacy.

Sussi looked left, then right to make sure no one else could hear her. "Henriette, would you have made such a deal with the pigs? I mean... would you have sent us to hell to get Vera back?" she whispered for Henriette's ears only.

The two women stared intently at each other for a few seconds before Henriette broke the spell and looked down at her hands. "I honestly don't know, Sussi," she said even more quietly. "But I do know you can never count on any deals made with the Nazis, so... God... I don't know."

"I think I understand," Sussi said and gently mussed Henriette's thigh.

Henriette looked up and offered her young friend a wistful smile. "Thank you. From the contact I have at the Shell House, I've heard so many stories of... of torture and humiliation and... and rape. If I could spare Vera th- that, maybe I-"

Behind Henriette and Sussi, Birthe and Jørgen appeared to have ended their brief relationship, at least judging by the tears that were streaking down Birthe's face as she ran back to the bench to bury herself in Mrs. Nørby-Henriksen's comforting arms.

"Everybody, listen to me," Jørgen said and raised his hands in the air. "Following the SOE's standard procedures, when a resistance group has been compromised, as you have, you must burn any evidence linking you to each other. You must destroy any illegal print material you have, and you must bury your weapons-"

"What weapons?" Henriette barked. "We were never allowed to have any!"

"And perhaps rightfully so, hmmm?"

Henriette knew her next words wouldn't be in Emma Gad's book on proper conduct, so she kept her mouth firmly shut and settled for glaring at the operative.

"All right, scratch burying the weapons. But the other items remain valid. It must be done at once," Jørgen continued. "Also, if you have access to cyanide capsules, prepare them. A quick death by your own hand is far better than suffering through lengthy sessions of torture by the Gestapo," he said, holding up his special fountain pen.

For a little while, the only sounds heard were Birthe's quiet sobs. Henriette, Sussi and Mrs. Nørby-Henriksen all stared at Jørgen with wide, worried eyes, unable to get a word across their lips.

"Miss Brandt, I need a word with you," Jørgen said and moved toward the steep staircase. "Let's go upstairs into the dining room."

Henriette blinked a few times to get her nerves back under control. She quickly looked at the street-wise Sussi who had become far quieter - and paler - than normal. "I'll be right there, Mr. Ingvardsen," she said loudly before turning back to the young woman. "Don't listen to him, Sussi. Hey... don't listen to him. We're going to find a way out of this mess, I swear."
"We better 'cos I'm not planning on checking out just yet... I don't wanna suck on a cyanide lollipop any time soon, ya know," Sussi mumbled, rubbing her chin.

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Upstairs in Mrs. Nørby-Henriksen's stately dining room that had fallen into disuse when the war broke out - the lady of the house preferred to eat in the warm kitchen instead of the frosty dining hall - the large table, the ten leather chairs and the sideboards had all been covered by white sheets to protect them from dust and the strong rays of the sun that had access through a row of tall windows overlooking the magnificent back garden.

Like he had done below, Jørgen leaned against a wall with his arms crossed over his chest while he waited for Henriette. "Miss Brandt," he said when his blonde opponent entered the dining room, "I hope you know the chances of you ever seeing Miss Holgersen again are one in ten at best. Even if you do see her through some kind of divine intervention, you must understand she will have been affected by what she's been through."

"I know," Henriette said somberly.

"Though I do not condone or even understand your relationship, it's clear to me you're fond of her," Jørgen said, shooting Henriette a probing look.

Henriette narrowed her eyes dangerously, but understood that Jørgen was trying to reach out to her. "Oh, it goes just a little bit deeper than that, Mr. Secret Agent Man." 

"Mmmm. What I meant to say was that if you do see her again, you must understand she's no longer the same woman she was two days ago. She will have changed irrevocably. They'll have done things to her that no woman or even man can endure. Horrible things. All in all, perhaps it would be best if you never found each other again. It would save you a lot of grief and heartache."

Henriette opened her mouth to reply but closed it again at once because she knew it would be a strong curse. Sweeping her coat aside, she put her hands on her hips and shot the operative a dark look. "Mr. Ingvardsen," she tried, carefully considering her words, "I truly wish that you'll learn the concept of love some day. The very definition of love is that whatever comes our way, we'll deal with it together."

"I see."

The silence that followed proved that Jørgen Ingvardsen didn't see it at all.

"Mmmm. Goodbye, Mr. Ingvardsen. Excuse me for not following you to the station," Henriette said and walked out of the dining room to go back downstairs - she wanted to say goodbye to her friends and then she was going to head home, come hell, high water or German soldiers.

Henriette could only maintain her cocksure act until she reached the end of the garden path. Once she had closed the heavy cast iron gate behind her, she had to lean against the stone fence to get her bearings. Her head was swimming with fear of what Vera might have been subjected to, but at the same time, she knew she'd fall to pieces if she dwelled on those dark thoughts for too long.

It didn't help that passers-by still offered her their condolences. She knew they were given in kindness, but after what she had learned in the last meeting with the SOE operative, she could hardly even smile at the people, much less thank them.
When she noticed she was being watched from across the street by two young boys, she sighed and pushed herself off the stone fence. Sick and tired of everything, she shuffled along the sidewalk to get to the tram lines on Østerbrogade.

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The day was bright but chilly. Although the calendar had moved into the Spring months, the trees were still bare and the wind still held a winter-like cold on the leading edge - and there was no shortage of wind at the tram stop.

When Henriette reached the stop, she rather typically saw the end of a tram driving away. Sighing, she pulled her coat closer and began to shuffle around on the spot to fight the chill.

There was less traffic on Østerbrogade than usual and she wondered why that would be. The number of bicyclists was down, which was surprising enough in itself, but there were hardly any commercial vehicles either. When more than one finally did show up, they came in groups.

Someone next to her talked about the Germans conducting massive searches in houses and on Østerbrogade - or maybe even all the major streets and boulevards - and she immediately ducked her head into her coat, almost like she was afraid she would be spotted right there and then.

The next tram was packed to the rafters and drove right past the stop she was waiting at, leaving behind a groaning, cursing group of people who had wanted to get on it.

By now, Henriette's nose was turning blue from the cold and she kept using her handkerchief to fight it. Her insides were a different matter. The news of the searches told her something major was up; most likely the Germans trying to flush out members of the resistance.

"About bloomin' time!" someone shouted in the group of people she was standing in, alluding to the next tram that slowly made its way down the line to the stop.

Henriette was grateful for the respite from the chill, and she hurried up into the tram the moment it stopped right in front of her. After paying her fare, she shuffled down along the center corridor to find a seat next to one of the doors.

The tram quickly filled up, but because women and the elderly had preference to sit down, she stayed put on the hard bench. Overcome with fatigue and the dark thoughts that raced through her mind, she leaned back in the seat and stared out onto the passing traffic with eyes that didn't see much of anything.

At the next stop, a young woman in a winter dress and a cotton raincoat sat down next to her. The young woman briefly glanced at Henriette before she offered her condolences. Henriette chuckled darkly and mumbled a "Thank you."

The tram suddenly came to a halt between stops. Henriette sensed danger at once but she was hindered by the young woman next to her and the fact that the center corridor was packed with people - in short, she was unable to get up and leave if she had to.

Nothing happened for the first few seconds, but the tram soon rocked like someone had stepped up into it. Then the command came that Henriette had dreaded: "Kontrolle! Ausweise!" - the order the Germans gave when they wanted to check people's papers.

While the other passengers around her dug into their pockets and wallets for their papers, Henriette did nothing. She looked out of the window with a sinking heart, knowing that she had more than likely reached the end of the line.
When the first of the two veteran soldiers from the regular Wehrmacht came down to the bench Henriette shared with the young woman, he held out his hand with a gruff "Ausweise."

The young woman quickly showed him her papers, but Henriette couldn't find the strength. It didn't really matter, anyway, because the moment the soldier would see her name, he would recognize it from the list of people they were looking for - that was Henriette's rationale for doing nothing.

"Fräulein, Ihre Ausweise!" the soldier said insistently. When Henriette didn't move a muscle, he shoved the young woman aside and grabbed Henriette harshly by her upper arm.

Whistling for his colleague, the two soldiers dragged Henriette away from the bench, out of the tram and out to a Leutnant who was waiting by their Kübelwagen.

Up front, the tram's conductor was told that he could drive on, and soon, the tram and its load of silent, shocked passengers left without Henriette.

The Leutnant - in his mid-thirties, slightly paunchy and the owner of a face that could have been called friendly had it been peacetime - cast an interested eye at Henriette's blonde hair and fair complexion. "Fräulein, it's really quite rude not to show your papers when we ask so nicely," he said in German. "Feldwebel! Search her."

The Sergeant who had dragged Henriette out of the tram went to work searching her, and for the second time that day, her personal space was severely violated. It didn't take long for the Feldwebel to find her identity card and he handed it to his superior at once.

"Born January seventh, 1918. Civic status single. No children. Henriette Brandt?" the Leutnant said, furrowing his brow under his field gray officer's cap. "Are you of German descent? With such an Aryan name and your fair looks, you almost have to be."

"Yes, Herr Leutnant. My grandfather was born in Kiel and moved to Copenhagen in the 1890s," Henriette said in her best grammar-school German.

"And you know our ranks, too. I'm impressed," the officer said and jotted down the information from the ID card before he handed it back to Henriette.

Taking the card, Henriette stared at the officer in disbelief. 'What is this? What are they waiting for? I mean... there's no way they're not looking for me... but... but perhaps Vera hasn't talked... yet?'

"Fräulein, why didn't you show your papers when the Feldwebel told you to?"

"I..." Henriette said, looking down to win a few seconds. She had been given a second chance and she knew she'd be a damn fool if she didn't take it - and sometimes, second chances required a white lie or two to work properly. "To tell you the truth, Herr Leutnant, it was because I wanted to get off the tram. You see, I am pregnant with a German soldier, Karl-Heinz Naumann from the 391 regiment," she said, putting her hands on her belly to add gravitas to her words, "I happened to mention it in passing to the young woman sitting next to me. She understood, but the others, well, they did not and started calling me names and... oh, I felt dreadfully uncomfortable. And I saw a perfect rescuer in your Feldwebel. I apologize."

The Leutnant chewed on his cheek as he digested the words. Then he nodded and stepped away from the Kübelwagen. "There's no need for an apology, Miss Brandt. I understand perfectly. Let me drive you home, that's the least I can do," he said and opened the narrow door in the side of the vehicle.
Henriette's blood froze over at the thought of being driven home by a Wehrmacht officer, and she hurriedly shook her head, though showing the greatest gratitude possible. "Oh, Herr Leutnant, thank you very much, but it won't be necessary. Walking is good for the body and the soul," she said with a candy-sweet smile.

"Indeed it is, Miss Brandt. In that case, I wish you a safe walk home," the Leutnant said and clicked his heels together while offering her a quick salute.

"Thank you... thank you very much, Herr Leutnant," Henriette said and smiled some more. Once she was free to leave, she walked away in an unhurried yet determined stride as always, thanking her lucky stars and every single deity who would listen. It would be a long walk home, but it was still better than experiencing it from the inside of an SD van like Vera had done.

* * *

CHAPTER 6

Tuesday, March 20th, 1945, five thirty, P.M. - the Shell House.

Hearing the guard approaching once again, Vera forced herself to sit upright on the lumpy bunk bed she had been given. She hadn't had a minute's sleep - or even rest - since the SD had placed her in a temporary holding cell nearly eighteen hours earlier, and she was so exhausted she had trouble focusing.

Instead of staying in the Shell House itself, she was in a wooden building in the courtyard, a hastily erected barrack that reeked of untreated wood, roofing felt, sweat, fear and other, far more disgusting things.

The only items in her cell were a wooden table, a tin plate, a tin cup, a bunk bed with a mattress and a straw-filled pillow that were both so lumpy it was impossible for her to find rest, and finally an open bucket made of wood she could use to relieve herself in - or rather, on.

The waste bucket smelled so horrendously she had pushed it into the farthest corner from the bunk, but since her cell was barely larger than the average hen house, there wasn't much she could do to combat the stench. At one point, nature had demanded she used the bucket for a number one, but the experience was so gut-churningly awful she had hardly been able to concentrate on doing her business.

At regular intervals, one of the guards would come into her holding cell and give her water or slap something so disgusting onto the tin plate that she had nearly vomited the one time she had tried to eat some of it.

Her wristwatch and all her other personal belongings - like her house keys and her purse - had been taken from her when she had arrived at the holding cell so she had no idea what time it was or even how long she had been there. All she knew was that she was so hungry her intestines screamed for nourishment, but at the same time, the stench from the waste bucket turned the mere thought of food into something so gross she needed to block it out of her mind.

In the holding cell next to hers, a loud bang was heard when the guard pounded on the door to frighten the inmate. The first time he had done it to Vera, she had cried out in fear which seemed to have given the guard a little thrill - after the first time, he always did it twice on Vera's door, just to state his presence.

Vera could hear muffled voices through the wooden walls, but she didn't have enough strength left to hear what was said. It was a male voice, that was all she could make out.
A little while later, the guard's hobnailed boots walked noisily down towards Vera's cell in the narrow corridor of the barrack. Keeping with his plan, he pounded twice on the door to get a reaction out of her.

By now, Vera was too exhausted to even jerk which seemed to disappoint the overweight guard as he stepped into the holding cell with a jug of water. The uniform of the double-chinned Corporal - who was in his late forties or early fifties - was just a size too small for him, best illustrated by the way the fabric was stretched at the buttonholes of his jacket.

Vera remained still as the guard poured some water into her tin cup. She expected him to leave once the cup was full like he had done all the other times, but this time, he kept standing in the middle of the cell, observing her silently.

"You know, Fräulein," he finally said in German, "I can't understand why nobody's been to see you yet. I'm kicked out of bed in the middle of the night by Obersturmführer Greinert who demands a cell for a prisoner... and then, nothing. You haven't even been processed yet. Ah, who am I to question the officers," he said with a shrug before he lumbered out of the cell and slammed the door shut behind him.

Once she was alone, Vera took the tin cup and drank a few gulps. "I hope they've forgotten all about me," she said in a croaky voice as she wiped her lips on the back of her hand.

She tried to straighten her sorry-looking clothes and comb her wild hair with her fingers, but she soon gave up and instead swung her legs up into the lumpy bunk bed. Lying down with a deep, heartfelt sigh, she listened to the guard move into the next cell. Once again, a few words were exchanged with the prisoner, but like before, she couldn't make out any details.

She desperately needed some rest so she closed her eyes simply to see where it might take her. A scant moment later, she fell into a deep sleep that overcame even the guard's pounding on the doors further down the corridor.

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"Aufstehen!" the order to get up was barked so loudly in the small holding cell that Vera nearly fell out of the bunk bed. Looking around in a daze, she spotted three Germans standing in her cell, the Obersturmführer from the SD who had transferred her from the HIPO stationhouse, and two further soldiers in gray uniforms.

"Aufstehen, hab' ich gesagt!" the Obersturmführer barked, but Vera's mind was too fuzzy from the lack of sleep to translate the angry words. Moments later, she knew exactly what they meant when the two regular soldiers grabbed her under her arms and pulled her upright.

The rude awakening gave Vera a throbbing headache, and the prospect of being questioned by the hardnosed officer only made it worse. Looking at the Obersturmführer's gray eyes and no-nonsense face, she knew she was in for a frightening experience. It all added up to her stomach clenching in fear and her knees turning to jelly. When she began to wobble, the two soldiers grabbed her even tighter so she wouldn't fall down.

"Fräulein Holgersen," the Obersturmführer said calmly in German, "we suspect you're involved in the assassination of a man on Gammel Kongevej late last night. The man was killed with cyanide, a toxin often used by the resistance movement. As I'm sure you're aware, Oberst der Polizei Heidenreich has issued a decree that lists execution as the only suitable punishment for any man, or woman I might add, who is deemed a member of the illegal underground. Now you know where you stand. Feldwebel, take her to my office," he said and stepped aside so the Sergeant and the other soldier had room to drag Vera out of the holding cell.

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As Vera walked across the cold, dark courtyard towards one of the entrances to the Shell House itself, there were only two things on her mind: Henriette and the surprising fact that someone had been killed with cyanide. The only
man she could think of that could come into question would be the drunken fisherman who had taken a tumble on
his bicycle right in front of her. 'But why? Why cyanide, and how could he have died from it...? It doesn't make any
sense... unless he was a courier for a resistance group? Maybe he broke a capsule in the fall? No, that can't be
right... he was still singing when I was taken away in the HIPO car... oh God, how am I going to get out of this
mess?'

Lowering her head, she sighed so deeply it turned into a muted sob.

Obersturmführer Greinert who was walking right behind her noticed it at once. Nodding to himself, he allowed a
cold, little smile to crease his lips.

The group of four walked through a back entrance and into a lobby on the ground floor. The high-quality carpet
and the superb craftsmanship of the ceiling and the walls were a legacy of its former use as the main lobby for the Royal
Dutch Shell company, but the splendor had been tainted by several Nazi flags and the picture of Adolf Hitler that
adorned the main wall.

An area to the left of the hallway that had previously been the offices of the receptionists and secretaries now
belonged to the guard detail that had turned the large rooms into quarters and their messroom. Glancing to her left
through the glass facade, Vera could see the spot where she, Henriette and Jørgen had been standing the other week
to take the pictures of the building, 'God, that feels like a million years ago... it hasn't even been two weeks,' she
thought, once again sighing so deeply her shoulders slumped.

The Sergeant who held Vera by her left arm forced her to the right, over to an elevator that arrived just when they
did. "Excellent," Obersturmführer Greinert said and put a hand on the door so it wouldn't close before he could get
in. Once they were all inside the beautifully decorated elevator car, the officer hit the button for the fourth floor and
took a step back.

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Vera's legs became more and more reluctant to carry her as the group walked down the corridor that led to the
Obersturmführer's office on the fourth floor. She could feel tears stinging at the back of her eyes, but she was
determined not to show any weakness before they even got underway.

After walking past eight closed doors on a dark red carpet that was so soft their footfalls disappeared into it, they
finally arrived at a nondescript white door with a simple plaque that said 'Room 405 - Ostuf. Horst Greinert.'

Vera gulped as she watched the officer reach for and depress the door handle. A shove in her back forced her to step
into the office that was more utilitarian than she had expected.

The office was divided into two sections, one half that saw a metal desk, a swivel-chair, a huge map of Copenhagen
pinned to the wall behind the desk, and several bookcases that reached all the way up to the ceiling. She noticed the
bookcases were filled with binders that were organized by color: black, gray, white, green, blue and finally red.

As the Obersturmführer walked up to his desk and took off his cap, Vera's eyes slid towards the other half of the
office. An open-backed metal chair was standing by itself inside something she could only describe as a giant
ashtray - a square, metal tray where the edges were flipped up all the way around. She noticed the chair seemed to be
bolted to the floor.

The rest of the floor around the chair and the tray was made of smooth linoleum that appeared to have been washed
recently. A dark red spot in the corner of the floor proved it had been done too hastily. Vera's eyes became fixated
on the dark red spot - it didn't take a genius to work out it was dried blood.
Unlike most of the pulp detective novels she had read over the years, the office had strip lights instead of a naked light bulb hanging down over the chair, but the rest of it matched - it was painfully clear to her that she was going to sit in the chair and be subjected to a brutal interrogation by the SD officer.

It appeared the Obersturmführer could read Vera's mind because he waved at the Sergeant who grabbed her by the arms and forced her over to the chair. Before she was shoved down on the seat, the officer held up his hand which stopped the Sergeant.

"Fräulein Holgersen, the central heating in my office works perfectly well. Why don't you take off your heavy winter coat?" Greinert said and took off his uniform jacket in sympathy.

Vera's guts performed a flip-flop and she pressed her lips together until they were just two narrow lines in her face. While she watched the Obersturmführer roll up his shirtsleeves to reveal arms that were just as wiry and sinewy as she had expected, the Sergeant grabbed her coat and pulled it off her shoulders.

Her matronly, flowery dress had become rumpled after wearing it for so long, not to mention sleeping in it, but that was the least of her worries. Out of sheer habit, she tried to smooth down some of the worst creases but realized it was a waste of her energy.

The next she knew, the Sergeant had forced her down onto the chair and had yanked her arms backwards to chain them to the chair's framework with metal manacles. She cried out in pain when the manacles cut into her wrists that were already sore from being treated roughly by the HIPO man who had arrested her, but once she had overcome the initial shock, she bit down on her lips and looked at the floor.

The Obersturmführer walked casually over to the windows that were covered by blackout curtains. Once he had peeked out onto the courtyard far below, he strolled back to the desk and sat down on the edge. "Thank you, Feldwebel. That'll be all for now."

The Sergeant and the regular soldier quickly saluted the officer and stepped outside.

With the door closing softly, the Obersturmführer reached for an item on his desk that looked like a foot-long metal rod with a blunt tip. "Fräulein Holgersen, what can you tell me about the man who was silenced by cyanide?" he said in a tone of voice that sounded like he was buying potatoes at the market.

"Nothing, Herr Obersturmführer," Vera said, staring at the floor in front of her feet.

"Oh, you can call me Herr Greinert," he said and slid off the edge of the desk.

"Herr Greinert... I don't know anything," Vera echoed in a croaking voice.

Holding the metal rod, the Obersturmführer strolled around the office until he ended up behind his prisoner. Without warning, he jabbed the oblong metal instrument into Vera's back at her right lung, making her cry out in startled pain. "Fräulein Holgersen, what can you tell me about the man who was silenced by cyanide?" - this time, the question was delivered more harshly.

"Nothing, Herr Greinert! Nothing!"

"Now why don't I believe you?" he said and jabbed her in the lung a second time.

Tendrils of pain shot up from Vera's back and she couldn't hold back a cough that was brought on by the vicious jab. She shied back, slowly shaking her head from side to side. "I don't know anything, Herr Greinert..."
Greinert grunted and let the metal rod glide down and across Vera's flowery dress until it reached the spinal ridge in the center. "So you don't know anything about the cyanide?" he said, holding the instrument ready just below her lungs.

"I don't kn- AARGH!" - the pain that exploded out from Vera's spine was enough for black spots to appear in her vision. The jab produced a wave of creepy-crawlies that spread out over her back as far up as her neck. "I d- don't kn- know anything..." she croaked though clenched teeth.

"Hmmm," Greinert said and pulled a step back from his prisoner. Seemingly in thought, he walked casually back to his desk and put down the metal instrument.

Vera was too preoccupied by her aching lung and spine to really notice the Obersturmführer's eyes on her, but the little she did catch was enough to send a new wave of creepy-crawlies across her body.

The officer was studying her like a slab of beef at a slaughterhouse. He looked at her feet, her legs, her knees, her arms, her elbows and finally at her face, all without revealing what he had in mind. "Fräulein Holgersen," he said, moving away from the desk empty-handed. "May I inquire why you broke the curfew?"

"I... I just couldn't make it home in time."

"Ah, but according to the preliminary paperwork I got from the Hilfspolizei, you ran in the opposite direction of your home when you were apprehended."

"I got scared, Herr Greinert..."

"Were you with anyone?"

"No."

Vera never saw the violent slap coming before it hit her across her left cheek. Greinert had put so much strength behind it her head was whipped to the right, and if she hadn't been chained to the chair, she would have fallen off.

"Liar!" the Obersturmführer roared directly into her face.

Dizzy, stunned and frightened out of her wits, Vera sat up straight and shook her head. "No! No, no! I w- was alone!" she said in a croaky voice - the deafening ringing in her left ear made her hear herself like she spoke through a pillow.

The Obersturmführer was clearly dissatisfied with her answer because he pulled his hand back to slap her again.

"No, it's the truth! The truth!" Vera cried, "I w- was minding my own business when this stupid, drunken man came driving towards me on his bicycle... he was so drunk he could hardly drive straight! He fell off right in front of me... that's why I ran the wrong way... I was afraid someone would look out and see us and call the HIPOs!"

"And then you killed him by slipping him a cyanide capsule," Greinert stated, still holding his hand ready to slap Vera again.

"No!" Vera cried, but suddenly remembered something that could possible help her if only her tormentor would listen. "The- the- Herr Greinert, when the HIPOs had arrested me, th- they talked about the drunken man singing! One of them... the driver... asked if they should arrest the drunken man as well, but one of the other HIPOs said that he would only throw up in the car! He was alive when we left! That's the truth!"
The answer seemed to appease the Obersturmführer enough to lower his arm and stroll over to Vera's other side. "And you are certain of that? You know I'll verify it so it would be very foolish of you to lie to me."

"Yes, that's wh- what happened, Herr Greinert..."

"Mmmm." The officer started moving back up to his desk, but he suddenly spun around and flew back at Vera. "But if you're telling the truth," he said menacingly as he grabbed her by the chin and forced her head up towards his own, "that prompts two further questions. One, what were you really doing there so late? And two, who killed the drunken man? Someone did, that's an undeniable fact, Fräulein Holgersen."

Frightened beyond belief by the harsh grip on her jaw, Vera could hardly breathe and her eyes rolled around her head like they weren't attached to anything inside. "I d- don't know who k- killed him!" she cried through teeth that were forced together by the officer's hand.

"It's clear to me," Greinert said and let go of Vera's chin, "that you were there to meet someone. Perhaps you were already on your way home after the meeting, perhaps you were yet to have the rendezvous, I can't say... but I'm certain a meeting is what you were there for. Who, Fräulein Holgersen? Who were you there to meet?"

"I wasn't there to meet anyone, Herr Greinert, I was just late going home..."

"Where had you been?"

"I h- had come from a family member who was ill, and-"

**SLAP!** - "I warned you not to lie to me!" Greinert barked, pulling his arm back to add yet another slap to Vera's cheeks, though this time, he decided against going through with it.

The second slap was as hard as the first, and by now, both Vera's cheeks were stinging and glowing red. Her breath came in bursts and her chin was quivering badly, but she forced herself to hold back the tears by staring hard at the ashtray-like floor.

"Let's try that again, Fräulein Holgersen," Greinert said, walking back up to the desk. "Where had you been?"

The thoughts were tearing through Vera's mind. She didn't know how to answer the question without betraying Henriette, Jørgen and the members of the Knitting Club, not to mention their families. But what could she say to appease the brutal officer?

Before she had time to finish her thoughts, the Obersturmführer lost his patience and came back at her. "Can't answer or won't answer?" Greinert said, once again grabbing hold of Vera's chin and forcing her head upwards. "Fräulein Holgersen, you are a member of the resistance, aren't you?"

"No..." Vera croaked through clenched teeth.

"Please allow me to suppose for the sake of argument that you are. Let me see, what are the key pieces of evidence," Greinert and went back to sit behind his desk. Taking a folder, he looked up at his prisoner. "Ah, yes. According to the preliminary paperwork, you were wearing a dark coat... which is still present... a dark hat, dark shoes... also still present. Now this is the interesting part: apart from your wristwatch, you weren't wearing any jewelry. Nothing. No necklace, earrings, engagement band, or even a friendship band."

"I'm not married or engaged," Vera croaked.
"Oh please, Fräulein Holgersen, do you expect me to believe that a woman of your looks isn't sought after? Hardly. Here's what I think," Greinert said and put away the paperwork. "Your dark clothes and your lack of jewelry indicate to me that you were distributing illegal leaflets or the like. Perhaps even the Free Voice Of Denmark. Am I right?"

Vera muttered a croaking "No..." but she knew the fear in her eyes gave her away. If the SD already knew about the Free Voice, why hadn't they cracked open the distribution network, she thought, swallowing hard.

"Who is your controller?"

"My con-?"

"Who are your contacts?"

"I d-"

"Who are the other members of your group?" Greinert said and got up from his desk with his metal instrument ready to pounce.

"But-"

"Names, Fräulein! I want names!" the Obersturmführer barked into Vera's face while he jabbed the rod into her solar plexus without warning.

Turning white as a sheet from the pain, Vera lost her breath in a single burst. Golden stars and black spots danced in her vision as she struggled to regain it, gasping for air like a fish on dry land. Wheezing and moaning, she rocked back and forth as far as her chained hands would allow to get the invigorating air back into her lungs.

When she finally managed to get her breathing going again, she looked up and tried to focus on her tormentor, or indeed on anything in the office. Gasping in all the air she could, she shook her head and looked down at her shoes.

"No... names... alone..." she said between gasps.

"Why were you there, Fräulein Holgersen?"

"I c- can't brea-"

"Who were you there to meet?"

"I w- was just late h- home..."

Grunting, the Obersturmführer strolled up behind his prisoner and held the metal rod ready. "It would be so much easier for you if you just gave me a few names. I'm not expecting you to give up the entire Danish resistance, Fräulein, of course not... just your controller, your contacts and your closest associates in your group. Is that too much to ask for?" While he spoke, he took Vera's long hair in his hands and stuck the rod through it like a crochet hook.

"I have no names..."

With a cold smile, Greinert began to turn the rod, creating a vice in Vera's hair that twisted it into a spiral that grew tighter and tighter for each turn. By the third turn, several tufts of black hair fluttered to the ground having been pulled out of her scalp by the forces.
The pain was instant and unbearable, and all Vera could do to combat it was to lean back on the metal chair so her head was closer to the rod. Once again she gasped for air, but this time, the cause was the blinding white pain that was transmitted directly into her brain from all over her scalp.

"Names?" Greinert whispered into Vera's ear, oblivious to the pain the woman was under.

Vera's mind screamed for mercy but she wouldn't give the sadist the pleasure of hearing it. The thoughts of Henriette being rounded up by the Nazis and exposed to a similar kind of torture sent a jolt of pain through her heart that was far stronger than the one she experienced physically. However, she didn't owe the SOE agent any favors - the man had done nothing but harp on her ever since he had arrived.

"Jørgen... Jørgen!" Vera cried hysterically. "Jørgen!"

"Jørgen? And who might that be...?"

"Jørgen Ingvardsen... con- contact..."

"I see. How interesting," the Obersturmführer said and jerked the metal rod out of Vera's hair with no regard for her well-being.

In her peripheral vision, Vera could see more hair that had been torn out by the violent motion flutter down to the floor, but she would gladly accept a completely bald head if it meant the twisting would be stopped. "Jørgen Ingvardsen," she croaked again, hoping that it would be enough to get her off the hook, at least for the time being.

Greinert nodded and went over to one of the bookcases. After moving his finger along the spines of the colorful binders, he found the one containing 'I' and pulled it out. "Ingvardsen," he said as he walked over to his desk and sat down.

He quickly leafed through the index until he found one that said 'Ingvardsen, Jørgen'. It didn't take him long to find the record in the binder, but when he had, he tapped his finger on the page with a dark look on his face.

Briefly looking up, Vera just caught the look on the Obersturmführer's face. Gulping, she looked back down in a hurry, hoping she hadn't made a mistake after all.

Greinert grunted and closed the binder with a soft plhum. As he continued to tap on his desk with one hand, he reached for a telephone with the other. After lifting the receiver, he dialed a short number and waited for someone to pick it up. "Herr Leutnant, this is Obersturmführer Greinert. I need a guard in my office immediately ... Four-oh-five ... Yes."

Hanging up, he dialed another number and waited for a connection. "Is the Standartenführer still in? ... Yes? ... Excellent. I'll be there in three minutes."

Once the brief conversation was over, he rose from the desk and rolled down his shirt sleeves. "Fräulein Holgersen, the information you gave me was very interesting. Very interesting indeed," he said as she stuck his arm down the sleeve of his uniform jacket.

"Does that mean I'm free to go...?" Vera croaked.

Greinert stopped what he was doing and stared incredulously at his prisoner. "Ha! That's the infamous Danish humor right there! No, it doesn't mean you're free to go... however, it does mean I have an important meeting with the Oberst der Polizei. With my chief."
"Oh..."

"Mmmm," Greinert said, observing his prisoner closely. Grunting, he adjusted his uniform so it was straight and uncreased for the meeting he was about to attend. "Now this Jørgen Ingvardsen... would he be the one who killed the drunken man with cyanide?"

"N- no," Vera said and shook her head, "he wasn't there... couldn't be..."

*Knock, knock!*

"Enter!" Greinert barked, taking the binder from the desk and walking over to the door.

A young soldier with a rifle over his shoulder stepped inside and saluted the Obersturmführer.

"Excellent," Greinert said and put his hand on the door handle. "She's all yours. Eyes straight ahead, soldier."

Vera didn't know exactly how much time had passed since the Obersturmführer had left, but she guessed it was no more than ten or twelve minutes. Her cheeks were burning less than they had done, but her spine, her lung and especially her solar plexus were still aching worse than anything she had experienced since falling off a bicycle and breaking several ribs many years earlier.

The presence of the young soldier and the eerie, foreboding silence in the office were getting to her. She longed to hear Henriette's silky smooth voice telling her that it would be all right, that she shouldn't be afraid and that they would soon be together, but she knew she would most likely never hear it again.

In her mind, she began composing the farewell letter she knew she would be expected to write. Over the two years she had helped distribute the Free Voice Of Denmark, she had often read reproductions of letters written by prisoners soon to be executed for so-called crimes against the Fatherland. The tone of the notes showed the sadness of the condemned men and women, yet also the chin-up attitude they all possessed. Vera didn't even have to look deeply into her heart to know beyond a shadow of a doubt that she would be unable to maintain a dignified facade once it was her turn to stand in front of the firing squad.

Even before she'd had time to think about the opening words of her letter, the office door opened to reveal the Obersturmführer and another, older man. The young soldier who had been guarding her snapped to strict attention and saluted the two men like his life depended on it, before he left in a hurry.

Vera glanced to her right to find out who the other man was, but wished she hadn't when she recognized the round face and slightly bulky figure of the man she had seen in the open staff car the day she, Jørgen and Henriette had taken the pictures of the Shell House - it was none other than SS-Standartenführer Friedrich Heidenreich, the hands-on chief of all German police units in Denmark.

A second glance proved that the man was younger than she had thought initially, perhaps only in his late thirties or early forties. He wore the Iron Cross around his neck, a pair of oak leaves on his collar and many colorful bars and ribbons on his chest. Paired with his flawless, gray uniform, it proved that he meant business.

The moment Heidenreich entered the room, he began to study the dark-haired woman. Scrunching up his face, he began to rub his chin almost like he was thinking hard about something. "So this is Fräulein Holgersen? Strange," he said in a flat German accent that betrayed his working class upbringing, "I feel like I've seen her before... somewhere. Hmmm... oh, it'll come to me."
"I hope it won't," Vera thought, biting her lips. She knew the characteristic color of her eyes often gave her away, so she made sure to look down at the floor.

"She doesn't appear in any of our archives, Standartenführer. Nor has she been mentioned in any reports from our informants," Greinert said, holding the preliminary paperwork the HIPOs had made for him.

"Oh no, it's nothing like that... Hmmm. Herr Obersturmführer," the older man said humorously as he tapped his knuckles on the desktop, "I'm sure you must agree the standards of the resistance movement have improved greatly! When I think of the sorry individuals we've had in this chair... some of them had barely evolved from their distant ape relatives, but this one... hmm-hmmm!"

Greinert looked very briefly at Vera before he shrugged and returned to his paperwork.

"Fräulein Holgersen," the Standartenführer said, leaning down towards Vera. As he spoke, the humor faded from his round face and was replaced by a hard, no-nonsense look. "Jørgen Ingvardsen. That's the man you claimed to be your contact."

"Yes, Herr Standartenführer..." Vera croaked, looking down at the floor.

"Look at me when I speak to you!" Heidenreich barked, prompting Vera to look up at once. "That's better. Jørgen Ingvardsen. Are you aware that Mr. Ingvardsen is an agent for the Special Operations Executive in England?"

'Oh God, they already know about him... that leaves the barn door open for them to find Henriette...' Vera thought as her stomach churned ceaselessly. "N- no, Herr Standartenführer..."

"Well, he is. He left Denmark nearly eight months ago when we got too close to him. And now he's back. Hmmm," Heidenreich said, standing up straight and walking behind his prisoner. "What was your business with him?" he continued, putting his strong hands on Vera's shoulders.

"H- he was the intermediary."

"Of what?"

Vera closed her eyes and tried to penetrate the fog that rolled through her; a fog that had been created by the fatigue, the shock, the pain and not least the hunger that still gnawed at her bones. 'Whatever I do, I want to protect Henriette. The others... the others will just have to fight for themselves. They'll never touch Mrs. Nørby-Henriksen... nobody will ever suspect Birthe... and Sussi is too clever to get caught... but the newsletter... I can give them that...' she thought, shaking her head slowly. "The Free Voice Of Denmark," she croaked.

"Ah, would that be the illegal newsletter that prints nothing but lies about our Führer and the state of the glorious Fatherland?" the Standartenführer said with a gleam in his eye.

"Y- yes..."

"Fräulein Holgersen, you are aware that you will face a lengthy term in prison for admitting to distributing the Free Voice Of Denmark?"

Vera couldn't talk anymore so she settled for nodding.

"How many times have you helped distribute the illegal newspaper?"

"This was my first time," she whispered.
"Hmmm," Heidenreich said and moved back to the desk where Greinert was waiting for him with a dark frown on his face for not getting that information out of the prisoner earlier.

"Of course," the Standartenführer continued, "that creates a burning question in my mind that needs to be answered at once. Why would an SOE operative come back after only eight months away and then get involved with something as low-key as organizing the distribution of an illegal newsletter... with a woman who appears to be an amateur, no less? That doesn't add up."

"I d- don't-"

"Why was he really here, Fräulein Holgersen?"

Vera looked up at the two officers and cursed herself for even giving them Jørgen's name. 'God, how stupid was I? Why couldn't I have predicted that they'd know about Jørgen... that they'd know about the SOE? God, I really am an amateur... a silly, half-witted little girl who thought she could make a difference... but... maybe I could try to act like a... like a... maybe I could use the oldest trick in the book?'

"The pig betrayed me!" Vera spluttered in a surprisingly strong voice, hoping against hope the two experienced officers wouldn't look through her pitiful charade. "He said he wanted to... to take me back to England... he said he loved me... but he only used me to get close to someone I work with... a professor at the Central Hospital who in turn knows someone near Dr. Best!"

"The Reich plenipotentiary?" Heidenreich said, tapping an index finger against the side of his nose, "Obergruppenführer und General der SS Werner Best? The SOE are planning to assassinate Werner Best? Now that's a completely different story altogether. Herr Greinert, I do believe Fräulein Holgersen could be a valuable asset to us," he continued, turning back to the Obersturmführer.

"I agree," Greinert said, putting away Vera's paperwork. The wiry officer sat down on his chair and studied the face of their prisoner. He was annoyed that he hadn't been able to extract that information from her during his own interrogation, but at the same time, he wondered if she was being entirely truthful. "Standartenführer, I think we both agree that while Fräulein Holgersen is a fascinating woman, she is by far not intelligent enough to act as the head of a group."

"You have a point, Greinert. She seems to be one who's controlled by her heart, not her head," Heidenreich said with a smirk.

Vera looked down at the floor, silently agreeing with every word the two Nazi officers said about her. She knew she was driven by her emotions, by her love to Henriette, and by a fear that something would happen to her - those emotions meant she couldn't be cynical or make tough decisions like her far more logically minded partner, but they created the fabric that made her human.

"Yes," Obersturmführer Greinert said and lifted the receiver to call for an escort. "There's far more to come from her. I'll put her in the attic until tomorrow."

"Excellent, Greinert. I need to be there for the next interrogation," Heidenreich said and walked over to the door, "but I'll be out of the house until lunch so it'll have to be later than that. Tomorrow afternoon?"

"Jawohl, Herr Standartenführer. Heil Hitler," Greinert said and gave his superior a Nazi salute.

"Heil Hitler... and good evening," Heidenreich said with a slightly more casual salute before he walked out of the room.
While Greinert called the guard room and ordered another guard to the office, Vera closed her eyes and sent a silent prayer to any God who would listen. 'The attic... I'm going up into the attic... because they want to interrogate me again... oh God, I need a miracle! Please! And if you won't send one to me, please send one to my love... she'll need it just as much as I will...'

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CHAPTER 7

Wednesday, March 21st, 1945 - RAF Fersfield - seven A.M.

A dark gray Humber Super Snipe staff car drove slowly up to the sentry guarding the main entrance to the airfield. After the passengers had been checked by the sentries, the bar was raised and the car was allowed to go on.

A short minute later, the staff car rolled along the concrete roads behind the Nissen huts until it reached the command center close to the runways. Once it came to a halt, three men - a civilian and two officers in differently colored uniforms - stepped out and were greeted by the base commander.

"Welcome to RAF Fersfield, Air Vice-Marshal!" the base commander, Major Ian Kendall, said and stood to strict attention while he saluted his superior.

Air Vice-Marshal Sir Victor Beckett returned the salute and offered the base commander a smile. "Thank you, Major Kendall. This is Captain Edward Jacobsen and SOE operative Jørgen Ingvardsen, our Danish liaisons," he said, gesturing towards the other two men.

"Welcome, Captain Jacobsen. Mr. Ingvardsen," the Major said, saluting the Captain and shaking hands with the operative respectively.

"Mmmm," the Air Vice-Marshal said while he looked around at the base. In his mid-fifties, Sir Victor Beckett was a veteran of the Great War where he had been a bomber Captain stationed in France. Over the years, he had gained a slightly round figure and a ruddy complexion to go with it, but none dared to question his great tactical mind. "Let's go inside, shall we? It's too cold to stay out here for long."

"Indeed, Sir," the Major said and stepped aside for his illustrious guest. "Would you like a cup of warm tea before we begin, Sir? Oh, the briefing room is off to your left, Sir," he continued, noticing the Air Vice-Marshal had set off in the wrong direction inside the building housing the command center.

"Oh... of course, Major. Yes, I would like some tea. Thank you."

"Very well, Sir," the Major said and waved one of the office secretaries over to him.

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The briefing room was a large, rectangular affair with many rows of wooden benches for the aircrews and a raised dais with a desk at the far end. Behind the desk, a large map of the North Sea and Denmark hung on the wall with several black lines drawn on it that indicated the flight plans the crews were to follow during the raid. Two blackboards on either side of the large map showed call signs and wing assignments written in chalk. An empty easel stood off to the right of the dais, seemingly waiting for something important to be put on it.
Last but not least, a scale model of the Shell House and the surrounding cityscape was prominently placed on a table in front of the dais.

"Oh dear!" the Air Vice-Marshal exclaimed when he laid eyes on the model. "Oh dear... what a magnificent model. I've only seen photos of it... goodness me, look at the level of detail. Quite remarkable! Mr. Ingvardsen... Mr. Ingvardsen, come take a look. Is this a realistic model?"

Jørgen Ingvardsen walked quickly over to the model and crouched down so he could look at it from the proper angles. "It's highly realistic, Air Vice-Marshall," he said in his characteristic lyrical dialect that sounded just a little bit funny when he spoke English.

Behind them, Edward Jacobsen put his hands behind his back and looked at the structures surrounding the Shell House. While the two other men seemed to be enthralled by the details, he was worried about the maze of buildings the pilots needed to navigate through to get to the target, not to mention the sharp turns and evasive maneuvers they needed to make to avoid enemy fires once they were there.

A squeaking noise heralded the arrival of a secretary pushing a small cart with three cups, three saucers and a thermos of hot water.

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Half an hour later, the rows of wooden benches were filled with the thirty-six airmen who were to take on the challenge of the difficult, dangerous raid. A multitude of different British and Commonwealth accents wafted up to the green lamps in the ceiling, ranging from lyrical Scottish via upper-crust English to much broader twangs from Australia and New Zealand.

The chitter-chatter died down instantly when the Air Vice-Marshall stepped onto the dais with Major Kendall and RAF Group Captain Charles Roderick in tow. Major Kendall quickly stared down the men who were still talking before stepping up to the dais to begin the briefing.

"Gentlemen, this is Operation Carthage," the Major said in a strong voice to get everyone's attention. "The target is the Gestapo headquarters in the heart of Copenhagen, the capital of occupied Denmark."

An interested murmuring rose from the excited airmen, but they were soon shushed.

"Group Captain Roderick, the map of Copenhagen, please," the Major said and turned to the other officer who quickly stepped off the dais to get the easel. In the meantime, a large, black and white photostat of Copenhagen had been put on the easel, and it made the airmen scoot out to the edge of the benches to see better.

"This rectangular, or rather L-shaped building here is your target," the Major said and highlighted the Shell House on the photostat with a pointer. "It's difficult to make out from the air, so you need to be cautious. Fortunately for us, the Germans... in all their Teutonic efficiency... has painted the building in camouflage colors. Why is that fortunate I hear you ask? Because the Gestapo headquarters is the only building in Copenhagen painted in camouflage colors!"

That surprising piece of trivia created a murmur of laughter that rippled through the rows of airmen and even made the Air Vice-Marshal smile.

"Indeed!" the Major said and moved to another section of the photostat. "There are no secondary targets on this raid. The Gestapo headquarters will be your only target. The mission objective is to force the building to collapse and preferably to catch fire. Therefore, a few of you will carry incendiary devices. Due to rampant paranoia, the Gestapo archives are not located in a single room but are spread out over several offices and floors. Gentlemen, to successfully destroy the Gestapo archives, we need to flatten the building."
The pilots and navigators all nodded, busy taking notes of the details they had seen in the photostat and on the scale model.

Once the Major had their full attention, he tapped on the photostat with the pointer. "If for some reason you are unable to drop your bombs on the target, or if the target has already been obliterated by the time you arrive, proceed to this open terrain nine hundred yards south- and slightly south-west of the target, which is the freight yard, and release your load there. Do not attempt to return to base with a full set of eggs. Gentlemen, I hope I needn't remind you that at such a target, you will find tall smokestacks, cranes, bridges, light posts, et cetera, everywhere. In other words, stay alert! You'll be going in on the deck at two hundred-seventy knots or more. A smokestack will not be easy to evade, so take care. Any questions?"

"How well is the target protected, Sir? Where are the flak towers and turrets?" a navigator said with his hand in the air.

"Mr. Ingvardsen can answer that question better than I so I'll leave it to him," the Major said and stepped back to allow Jørgen Ingvardsen to come to the front of the dais.

Red-faced at being at the center of attention, the operative stared at the many expectant people but soon snapped out of it and took the pointer the Major had left behind. "Well, ordinarily, a complex of such importance would have two if not more anti-aircraft rapid-fire cannon turrets on the roof, but because it's sloped quite steeply, that's impossible here. At the City Hall Square some seven hundred yards further east of the target, there's a pair of flak turrets and also a stationary eighty-eight millimeter cannon, or there were as of two days ago to be exact. Beyond that, I predict you'll mostly face small arms fire, or possibly mobile flak cannons. They have a few."

"Thank you, Sir," the navigator said and hurriedly made notes on his notepad.

"Any further questions?" Jørgen said, but no one else seemed to have anything they were unsure of. "Group Captain, I better leave the stage to you."

"All right, thank you Mr. Ingvardsen," Group Captain Roderick said and assumed the pointer. "Let's move onto wing assignments. Today, the 140 Wing will be separated into three groups of six aircraft each. The groups will be followed by two Mosquitos from the film unit. Three squadrons of Mustangs will provide close air support underway and ack-ack duties while we're there. Our wave plan will be as follows, 487 Royal New Zealand Squadron up front and led by myself in X-X-Ray, then 21 Squadron led by Squadron Leader Caledon in V-Victor, then 464 Royal Australian Squadron led by Wing Commander McCallum in F-Fox. Call signs will be Gold, Blue and Red. The first wave will take off in just under an hour at 0835 hours, Gentlemen. Now, if you will direct your attention at the flight plan-"

While Group Captain Roderick went through the highly detailed flight plan, Jørgen Ingvardsen found a chair and sat down. The exhaustion caused by his stressful and hurried escape from Denmark - his second in less than a year - finally caught up with him and he had to stifle a yawn.

After he had left the women of the Knitting Club behind, he had taken the train to Frederecia in Jutland where he had changed to an overland bus. Once he had arrived in a nameless wilderness, he had taken a one-hour drive in a twenty year old Ford Model A with what felt like square tires to get to the ploughed field where his contact in England had said they would pick him up after nightfall - all in all, the escape had taken nearly sixteen hours, and now he was paying the price with a thunderous headache, a pale gray complexion and a head swimming from the stress and the lack of sleep.

While Jørgen looked at the Group Captain using the pointer to trace the attack and return routes on the map, he couldn't help but think of the two women who had been his Danish contacts - Vera and Henriette. He thought of them as odd on the surface and fully queer underneath, and yet he had to admit that a part of him respected their
strong personalities. *They really did have something to fight against... it's such a waste. Vera is sitting right where these guys are going... tomorrow at midday, she'll get eighteen thousand pounds of high explosives down on her pretty head if she's not careful... hell. It doesn't matter if she's careful or not, there's no way she can survive that... no way.*

At eight thirty-five, Group Captain Roderick and the rest of his wave of six de Havilland Mosquitos taxied down to the end of the main runway and waited for the signal man to send up a green flare from the control tower.

When he did, the pilots - waiting in three rows of two - increased the throttle to make the twin Rolls-Royce Merlins roar gutturally. After running slowly and labored on the first section of the runway, the tails of the first two planes went up and the warbirds eventually took off, each carrying two five-hundred pound bombs. The next pair was right behind the Group Captain and mirrored the procedure, as did the final pair.

"My God, they're loud! I've never heard anything this loud!" Captain Edward Jacobsen said, standing on the second floor balcony of the control tower with his hands firmly planted over his ears. The vibrations of the twelve-cylinder Merlins seemed to almost shake the concrete building apart when they blasted past on the runway. "Goodness me..." he croaked when the last of the first wave had left the ground.

The Air Vice-Marshal looked at the younger officer with a smirk on his slightly ruddy face. "Ah, then imagine what it'll be like when all eighteen come in for an attack... not to mention the thirty Mustangs. They have Merlins too, you know. Magnificent! Simply magnificent."

"I just think they're loud," Captain Jacobsen mumbled, looking to his right at the next wave that was already lining up with Squadron Leader Caledon in V-Victor at the front of the pack.

High above RAF Fersfield, Roderick and his Mosquitos were still climbing to the pre-set altitude of four thousand feet. Once they had reached it, they started circling to wait for the other two waves.

Exactly ten minutes after the departure of the first wave, Caledon and his men from 21 Squadron went through the same procedures and took off in pairs, leading to another ear-splitting wall of noise at RAF Fersfield.

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When the final wave of six Mosquitos lined up ten minutes later at five minutes to nine, Captain Jacobsen's ears were practically bleeding, but he knew he had to remain on the balcony for as long as the Air Vice-Marshal did. "Oh! Look at that!" he said, pointing at the starboard engine of Wing Commander McCallum's F-Fox that sounded rough and belched black smoke through the exhausts.

"Give it some wellie! Go on, man!" Air Vice-Marshal Becketts cried, raising a pair of binoculars he had around his neck to take a closer look at the recalcitrant engine.

The Wing Commander seemed to be listening because he was soon fiddling with the controls which made the engine come on song and run cleanly.

Up on the balcony, Captain Jacobsen glanced at the excited Air Vice-Marshal and wondered just what wellingtons had to do with anything - surely a man of his experience would know the pilots wore fur-lined leather boots? In the end, he chose not to make a comment.

When the last pair of Mosquitos had left the airfield, a strange, muted calm fell over the officers who were standing on the balcony. They followed the strike force in their binoculars until the fighter-bombers were only little, black specs in the far distance, knowing it was unlikely that all thirty-six airmen would return. Some might be shot down
and become prisoners of war, others might be killed in action, and others again might even ditch their damaged planes in the North Sea on the return leg - such was the nature of war.

"Mmmm," Air Vice-Marshal Beckett said as he handed back the pair of binoculars he had borrowed from Major Kendall. "What I wouldn't give to follow those chaps over there. Mmmm. Oh, there's nothing more we can do until they get back. Major, what's the projected return time?"

The Major briefly looked up from trying to stuff the binoculars back into a leather case. "Five to two, Sir."

"All right," the Air Vice-Marshal said and held up his hand to shield his eyes from the sun. Unsurprisingly, he wasn't able to see anything with his naked eye. "Mmmm. Let's go over to the command center and wait. Tea, anyone?" - With that, he spun around and headed for the metal staircase that led down to the ground.

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Five minutes into the flight, Group Captain Roderick adjusted the throttle controls and started looking for their escort. Despite the crippling losses suffered by the German Luftwaffe over the past year, they could still spring a nasty surprise or two on the unwary, so he kept a firm lookout to all sides at all times to stay alert of bandits.

On his right, his navigator James Cleland followed the heading on his maps and gave the Group Captain a thumbs-up.

A scant minute later, the first of the escort squadrons came into view, and the Group Captain signaled them by wagging his wings. "Blue Leader, Red Leader, this is Gold Leader," he said to the two other leading Mosquitos behind him. "Friendlies at nine o'clock. Until we reach the final waypoint, assume and maintain complete radio silence."

'Copy, Gold Leader' -- 'Roger that, Gold Leader,' Caledon and McCallum said into the Group Captain's earpiece.

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After flying east-north east for another twelve minutes, Roderick's navigator held up an index finger and turned it to the right, indicating they had reached the spot where they needed to change course. 'Approaching the waypoint now, Skipper. Swing to a heading of zero-six-niner degrees,' Flight Officer Cleland said in the intercom.

"Zero-six-niner degrees, Roger," Roderick said and performed an easy turn to get onto the new heading, feeling the vibrations of the engines change slightly before they settled down again.

Once the Mosquito was flying level, he looked in the small mirror above his seat and spotted the other two groups and the escort Mustangs following him onto the new heading.

The next item on the flight plan was the one that always sorted the men from the boys. Easing the flight stick forward, Group Captain Roderick performed a descent from his previous flight level of four thousand feet until the dark gray, foam-topped waves of the North Sea filled the Perspex windows of his Mosquito. Checking his instruments, he noted that he was skimming the surface of the sea at forty-five feet, an altitude they would remain at until they reached their target.

Looking to his right, he briefly took a hand off the controls to send his navigator a thumbs-up that was replied to in kind. The time was seventeen minutes past nine and they were on their way.
**Wednesday, March 21st, 1945 - twenty past nine.**

Henriette groaned in delight as she ran the toothbrush around her teeth for the first time in two days. After another night spent on the chest of drawers in the bicycle storage room, she had finally had enough and had ventured upstairs into her apartment to change out of her smelly clothes and to freshen up.

Using a strange kind of logic, it worried her that no HIPOs or German soldiers had come to the apartment on Stempsgade. On one hand, it could mean that Vera had been banged up so badly she couldn't speak, and on the other, she wasn't about to look a gift horse in the mouth.

After brushing her teeth and washing her face and neck, she quickly ran a comb through her hair while she kept an ear out for any odd or foreign sounds from the stairwell.

When everything seemed quiet, she made a quick decision and stepped out of her clothes to grab a revigorating shower.

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Combing her hair again, she stepped out of the bathroom in a very nice tan dress but came to a dead stop at the sight of a white envelope lying on the doormat at the foot of the front door. The envelope had obviously come through the letterbox, but she hadn't heard a thing, and she wanted to kick herself up the rear for being too careless.

Henriette took a deep breath and tip-toed over to the door to listen for any activity but found the stairwell to be silent. Cursing under her breath, she crouched down and took the envelope before she stomped into the living room to read it.

After rolling up the blackout curtains that had been drawn since the fateful evening where she and Vera had gone onto the newsletter run, she moved over to the window and held up the white piece of paper that was printed on the stationery of the Gestapo headquarters, made official by the opulent swastika and the chilling words *Office of Stndt.F. Friedrich Heidenreich, Oberst der Polizei. Commander of the Security Police (SD), Kripo, Orpo, Gestapo.*

It read, *Dear Madam, thank you for your inquiry of March 19th. The Greek statue of the legendary Amazon Queen Hippolyta was delivered earlier today and is largely intact. There are no blemishes or fractures but it seems it was shook during transport. For the time being, it has been put in storage in a protected box in the attic though it has been scheduled to be taken out for a further inspection after lunch today, Wednesday March 21st. News to follow. Respectfully Yours, secr. Lilly Jensen.*

"Oh..." Henriette breathed, reading the letter again. "No blemishes or fractures... oh, thank God... thank God for that. Taken out for a further inspection later today... all right. That's inevitable. 'News to follow' must mean Lilly will update me tomorrow... or later on today."

Closing her eyes, she held the letter to her heart while she sighed deeply. "Vera, love... I pray for you... and I've never prayed for anything in my life. I hope you can feel me... or maybe even hear me. Here's thinking of you, precious."

Another sigh rushed past her lips as she turned back from the window and began to clean up the slight mess she had made when she, Birthe and Jørgen had returned after Vera had been taken. The first she did was to retrieve the shoulder bag with the Free Voice Of Denmark she had simply dumped on the living room floor.

Because the distribution had been disrupted by the arrival of the HIPOs, there were still a dozen newsletters left in the bag, but she knew it would be far too dangerous to hand them out now - even if the Germans weren't actively looking for her yet, the HIPOs were always on the warpath.
Looking around, she decided to stuff the wad of illegal newsletters into the stove. It hadn't been long since the chimney sweep had been there so the material would be relatively safe inside the cast iron stove. "All right, what's next?" she said, dusting off her hands.

A shadow of guilt swept over her when she realized she had left her employer in the dark the previous day - she just hadn't had time or even the opportunity to call in sick. She went over to the telephone to do so, but as she put her hand on the receiver, she was worried the Gestapo would be listening in. If they were, they would know she was at home. "Mmmmm," she groaned, rubbing her chin.

"Oh, bloody hell, why does it always have to be so damn difficult?" she said and punched the air in frustration. "It wouldn't take me more than forty minutes to go over to the law firm, but then they'd see at once I wasn't really sick! No, I... I need to call them, dammit."

Picking up the receiver, she coughed a few times to get a frog in her throat as she dialed the number for the company where she worked as a secretary. "He- hello? Vivi, is that you?" she said in the most awfully sick voice she could muster. "Oh dear, I've picked up the flu... No, I said the flu, Vivi. I feel so terribly, horribly awful I..." - cough, cough - "Oh God... I can hardly get out of bed... I am so sorry I couldn't c- - cough, cough - "call yesterday, but... Vivi, I won't be able to come in f- - cough, cough - "for the rest of the week. No, I said the rest of the week. Yes." - cough, cough - "Yes, I'm sorry too. You'll tell the old man, right?" - cough, cough - "Thank you... talk to you later. Goodbye, Vivi."

Henriette chuckled at all the odd things she had been forced into doing over the past few weeks, but the chuckle died on her lips when she thought about her partner sitting alone and afraid in one of the rooms in the attic of the Gestapo headquarters.

It suddenly struck Henriette what she needed to do - she needed to go to the Shell House. She wouldn't be able to do anything once she got there, and it would be extraordinarily risky to do so on the whole, but she would at least be nearer to Vera. "Besides," she mumbled as she strode into the bedroom, "they'll never think of looking for me under their noses. I hope..."

After she had put on her best, most comfortable shoes, she went into the narrow hallway and took her favorite tweed jacket off its hanger. She quickly put it on and reached for her black beret.

With her outfit firmly in place, she sent another silent prayer to Vera before she left the apartment and locked the door behind her.

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Wednesday, March 21st, 1945 - somewhere over the North Sea - three minutes past eleven.

"That's the west coast of Jutland right there, Skipper. We may get some attention from Hitler's Atlantic Wall," Group Captain Roderick's navigator said over the intercom as he pointed out of the Perspex windshield at the coast line that loomed ever larger.

"Roger, nav," Roderick replied, too busy with keeping the Mosquito level to give his navigator a thumbs-up. The North Sea had been choppier than they had been told it would be which had resulted in salt water residue caking onto the engine cowlings, the eight gun barrels on the nose of the Mosquitos, and - worst of all - on the windshields.

They had already lost two of the escort Mustangs who had been forced to return to their base after suffering bird strikes, but so far, none of the Mosquitos had had any problems.
As the coast came towards them at a high rate of knots, Group Captain Roderick looked in his rear-view mirror to see if the other wings gained some altitude and spread out into a looser formation like they had been told. When it seemed everyone did, he concentrated on clearing the fortifications at the coast.

'Reaching the coast now, Skipper,' Flight Officer Cleland said into the intercom, making a check-mark on his maps. 'We're still on schedule.'

"Roger, nav. Climbing," Roderick said and pulled back on his controls to clear the many bunkers and cannon posts Hitler had ordered Field Marshal Rommel to build in the heady days of the war when the German High Command feared the Allies forces would use the flat, sandy coasts of Denmark to stage the invasion of Europe.

Soon, the entire strike force of twenty Mosquitos - two planes from the RAF Film Unit had joined them en-route over the North Sea since they came from another airfield - and twenty-eight Mustangs thundered over the fortified coastline with nary a shot fired back at them.

The terrain that rushed past in a colorful blur beneath them quickly changed from wide open, highly flat, sandy fields to the even flatter heath, and then into the first of the larger forests.

In the meantime, Roderick and the rest of the force had gone back down to the insane altitude of forty-five feet. With the speed they were going, the branches and the leafless crowns of the big trees they were thundering past blended into what appeared to be a soft, comfortable, grayish-brown cushion, but every pilot knew that if he ventured too low, it would be the last thing he ever did.

'Oh! Bogies on the ground, Skip!' the navigator said and pointed out of the windshield at a field that opened up ahead of them where a unit of German soldiers seemed to be running around in a panic.

"Roger, nav. We're going too fast for them. They won't have their rifles down until we're a hundred miles away," Roderick said and glanced out of the side window as his Mosquito rushed above the clearing.

The navigator continued to check their progress on his maps by keeping track of and subsequently identifying landmarks they flew past. When he spotted a tall grain silo in a small town to the south-east of them, he nodded and made a check-mark on the map. 'Skipper, we're approaching the next waypoint. In thirty seconds, turn to heading zero-eight-six degrees.'

"Roger, nav. Zero-eight-six degrees," Roderick said and prepared to change course.

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As the strike force thundered across another clearing on the island of Funen some eighty-five miles from their target, Group Captain Roderick's navigator whipped his head around so fast it nearly fell off. 'German mobile radio unit, Skip!' he said in an agitated voice, pointing down at the ground a few hundred yards to their right where a dark gray truck with a huge radio mast was stationed near a cluster of trees.

"Roger, nav. They'll call ahead but if we're lucky, they won't be able to guess where we're going."

'Let's hope so. Estimated time to separation point is four minutes and closing fast, Skipper. The Great Belt is coming up next.'

_*._.*._.
Down on the ground, an Oberleutnant from the Wehrmacht ran out of the radio truck and stared with a slack jaw at the strike force as it flew over his head. He frantically counted out loud to himself to keep track of the many planes, but had to call defeat when the twin-engined fighter-bombers kept on coming.

"Heilige Maria," he mumbled as he ran back into the radio truck. Pushing the equally slack-jawed operator aside, he sat down at a desk and sent a coded message to all major railroad junctions, headquarters, barracks and assorted other military installations on Funen and Zealand that a large force of at least fifteen Mosquitos and two dozen Mustangs were headed their way.

Wednesday, March 21st, 1945 - eleven thirty-six, A.M.

'We're over the Great Belt now, Skipper. There's Kalundborg at eleven o'clock. Looks like there's a bit of action at the German naval base,' Flight Officer Cleland said and pointed just a little to the left of straight ahead.

"Roger, nav," Roderick said and glanced to the left. "The mobile unit probably radioed ahead like we predicted."

A few miles ahead of the strike force, at least one if not two larger warships were leaving Kalundborg harbor at full steam to head to sea in case their base was the target of the bombing raid. On the docks, several blinking lights proved the Germans were responding to the force's presence by firing their anti-aircraft cannons, but they were too far away to do any good - or harm, depending on the point of view.

'And there's lake Tissø dead center, Skip. We're a minute ahead of the plan,' the navigator said and made a correction on his maps.

"Right. Let's see if the boys were awake during the briefing," Group Captain Roderick said and banked right just as he reached the nearest shore of the large lake.

The twin Merlins roared as the Mosquito changed course to stay with the forested shore of the lake. The fighter-bomber performed a graceful turn as it followed the shoreline all the way around the southern part of the lake.

Looking into his mirror, Roderick could see the other wings following him into the banking turn. Once he had made a complete tour of the lake, all planes were present and accounted for in a near-perfect line astern formation.

'They're all there, Skipper,' the navigator said, craning his neck to look behind them. 'All right, we're at the final waypoint. Turn to a heading of zero-niner-two degrees and increase to attack speed. Target is forty-seven miles away, ETA roughly eight minutes.'

"Roger that, nav, turning to zero-niner-two degrees. Blue leader, Red leader, this is Gold leader. Starting attack run now," Group Captain Roderick said and broke out of the holding pattern. As he slid the engine controls forward, the plane climbed to its preferred attack speed of two hundred and eighty knots. Behind him, the five other planes of Gold wing and one of the Film Unit Mosquitos left the lake as well and joined Roderick in the close attack formation known as the box. They were joined by a third of the remaining Mustangs, and soon, sixteen deadly fighters and fighter-bombers thundered towards the Shell House.

Over the lake, Squadron Leader Caledon and Wing Commander McCallum continued to circle according to the meticulously designed flight plan. When Group Captain Roderick and his Gold wing were four minutes away, Blue wing would follow them towards the target escorted by the next group of Mustangs. The same pattern would be repeated for the last time another four minutes later when McCallum's Red wing would bring up the rear along with the other Film Unit Mosquito.
The plan was to have Red wing arriving at the target by the time Gold wing would be swinging south-southwest to go home - but as all pilots who took part in the raid knew, the best laid plans could always come up short in love and war.

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**Wednesday, March 21st, 1945 - Copenhagen - twenty to twelve.**

Henriette stood with her hands behind her back and looked out over St. George's Basin. She had strolled around the artificial lake all morning until she had found a spot on the west bank from where she could observe the Shell House without appearing to be doing so.

With Spring reluctant to arrive, the bushes and trees were bare all along the basin, but it didn't stop the spot from being a peaceful oasis in the middle of the busy city, and Henriette was only one of dozens of people who had decided to take a stroll along the basin's gravelly paths.

Although the sun was shining from a clear sky, it was still a little nippy so she had her tweed jacket buttoned up to her neck. She knew it would look odd to remain in the same place for too long, so she shuffled back and forth near a bench, pretending to be watching a pair of seagulls that were engaged in a dogfight of sorts where they made several death-defying dives towards the surface of the basin. Through sheer skill, they always managed to pull up just in time before the seemingly inevitable impact.

The camouflaged building loomed large and foreboding some four hundred yards away from her, but she could clearly see the sentries patrol the perimeter, and also a black Mercedes staff car waiting for someone. Soon, an officer - judging by the reactions of the sentries - came out of the Shell House, climbed into the car and drove off.

Sighing deeply, Henriette noticed the park bench behind her had become vacant, and she walked over to it to sit down. She could still see the Shell House from the bench, so she crossed her legs at the knee and made herself comfortable, hoping to get into a state of peace that she would try to share with Vera.

"Hello, Miss... is this seat available?" someone suddenly said to Henriette's right. Looking up in a daze, she saw a young mother in a dark cotton raincoat and a dark hat carrying a little boy on one arm and pushing a baby carriage with the other.

"But of course, of course," Henriette said and scooted over to the left armrest of the park bench to make room for the mother and her children.

After the boy - who was dressed like a sailor on shore leave - had been carefully placed on the bench, the young woman reached into the carriage to take her other child, a little girl dressed in a pinkish gown.

"Oh, they're gorgeous," Henriette said, glad to have something else to think about for a change. "How old are they?"

The young woman smiled back and reached down to muss her son's hair. "Henrik here is three and Anne-Marie is one. They're so easy to deal with."

"That's good," Henriette said with a smile. She tried to tickle the young boy's hand but he seemed a little intimidated. After a few seconds, her efforts paid off and his face nearly split in two by a broad grin. "Oh, he's going to be a charmer when he gets older," she said to the young mother.

"I hope so. Are you waiting for someone?"
Henriette’s old habits of not talking to anyone about anything important kicked in and she quickly shook her head. "Oh no. I’m just enjoying the sun. Are you?"

"Yes, I’ve arranged to meet my husband in, oh," the young mother said as she pulled back her sleeve to look at her watch, "a couple of minutes. It’s his lunch break, you see. He’s working at the Technological Institute… right over there, next to that dreadful Shell House."

"I see," Henriette said, glancing at the camouflaged building.

The young mother began to hum a little ditty that came from an old but still popular operetta to her sleeping daughter, but when Henriette heard it, her stomach performed a flip-flop that left her feeling queasy.

The ditty had been the song playing when she and Vera had shared their first proper kiss many years earlier. They had been sitting among hundreds of other people at the promenade concert in Tivoli, the old amusement park next to the central station, holding hands and leaning into each other while a brass band visiting from the USA played the jaunty music. Night had fallen and it had been so dark among the spectators that they had dared to look at each other the way only people in love could.

Until then, they’d had to hide their love from their friends, families and colleagues, but that night, during the final encore, they didn’t care about any of that and shared a beautiful kiss that proved once and for all they were meant to spend the rest of their lives together.

That had been August 1936, and for eight and a half years, they had been true to the unwritten promise. 'And now we're apart,' Henriette thought while her heart became tighter and tighter, 'Will we ever see each other again? Will I get one of those awful, awful farewell letters the condemned people are forced to write? Will I be allowed to visit her grave? Will I even be told where it is?'

Her dark thoughts were interrupted by the sound of distant, rolling thunder. Henriette and the young mother both looked up at the clear blue sky in mutual bafflement over the odd phenomenon. "What in the world?" Henriette said, scrunching up her face.

"Didn't it sound like an airplane? I thought it sounded like an airpla-"

A split second later, a twin-engined fighter-bomber with a large roundel on the flank came roaring along Kampmannsgade headed directly for the Shell House. The plane was flying below the rooftops on what appeared to be a suicide run.

"That's the Royal Air Force! Why haven't the air raid sirens sounded?!" someone had time to shout before everything was thrown into an infernal confusion of crying children, hysterical parents and an overtaxed officer from the Home Guard who was trying desperately to get everyone to the nearby air raid shelters.

In the middle of it all, Henriette jumped up from the bench and stood with eyes as wide as saucers and her hands clutching her heart. She watched in unbridled horror as the first plane released two black bombs from its underside just before it performed a wild, screaming climb to clear the Shell House.

The bombs flew downwards before they hit the side of the building, penetrating it easily somewhere on the third floor. At first, nothing happened, but suddenly the inside of the impact site lit up like a Christmas tree. As the bombs detonated, the entire building seemed to jump free of its foundation - a fraction of a second later, the resulting explosion blasted the guts out of the floor the bombs had landed on.

Even before the next bomber came thundering down Kampmannsgade on its attack run, Henriette had set off towards the Shell House, running as fast as she could and screaming Vera's name at the top of her lungs in a wild, unrestrained panic.
CHAPTER 8

Vera didn't have a clue what was going on until she heard the characteristic banshee-like wail of the first bombs on their flight down towards their target. One second, she was eating the first honest meal she'd had while she was at the Shell House - mealy potatoes and stale, grayish-brown gravy - the next, she found herself suspended in mid-air with the various items in her cell flying around next to her.

Another second later, she was thrown across the cell and onto the wooden floor with such force the wind was knocked out of her. She landed very ungracefully on her knees and elbows and was instantly deafened by the thunderous roar that blasted up from a few storeys below her.

Shrieking, she clapped her hands over her ears, but it didn't do much to silence the blast.

The entire cell shook like a brig in a storm, and the blast caused untold mayhem in the small, wooden room. The metal lamp hanging from the ceiling fell down and was severely dented. Several of the floorboards were torn loose and stood up straight, tipping over the table Vera had been eating at, and finally the locked door to the corridor blew off its hinges and fell right down on her head.

Luckily, she managed to bring up her arms at the last moment, but the wooden door still gave her a good whack over the brow.

Pushing the door aside and rubbing her abused forehead, she stared around in a daze at the destruction. Scrambling to her feet, she hurried over to the bunk bed - that was remarkably still intact - and grabbed her dark coat to have something to hold onto.

Then she heard the next set of wailing banshees.

"Oh God, I'm gonna die in here!" she cried and threw herself onto the bunk just as a violent crash was heard from another part of the Shell House. Like before, the detonation only came several seconds after the impact, but this time, the level of destruction was less at Vera's end of the building.

She looked up in a severe daze, knowing that she was in the middle of an air raid, but not having the energy or the wherewithal to do anything about it.

Suddenly a man popped his blond head inside the broken door. "Anybody in here? Hello?" he said in Danish.

"Yes!" Vera croaked, waving her hand in the air, but it was difficult to see through the dust and smoke from the ruined building.

"Come on! Come on!" the man shouted, waving back at her.

Vera realized she had to do something or death would claim her without a fight, so she jumped up from the bunk bed and tore over to the man at the door. He was at her age or perhaps a few years younger. He appeared thin and frail, and she couldn't help but think that he had been exposed to far worse torture than she had.

"Come on. They're all running away... the front door's wide open!" he shouted as he pointed down the corridor.
Vera stuck her head out and saw an aging SS-Corporal being held at gunpoint by two other prisoners. One of them had simply taken the soldier's rifle and was using it against him. Mixed in with the dusty smells of the ruined building, a whiff of soiled pants wafted down from the aging soldier.

At any other time, Vera would have crinkled her nose in disgust, but right now, she understood him perfectly. Still holding onto her dark coat, she and the blond man who had found her turned left to hurry down to the staircase at the west end of the corridor.

Before they made it there, another set of wailing banshees proved they were in for a shock. The sound grew louder and louder, and Vera's eyes grew wider for each passing moment. "Oh God... they're gonna hit here..." she croaked, but the words had barely left her lips before the familiar violent crash was heard as the bombs penetrated the building's facade. This time, it felt like it happened right underneath her feet.

Crying out in terror, Vera literally put her long legs to good use as she tore ahead and performed a frantic leap forward that would have impressed a hunting lioness on the African savanna. Then the bombs detonated two floors below her.

Vera once again found herself suspended in mid-air, but this time, she hadn't even had time to land before she was surrounded by a storm of debris that came racing up towards her from below. Glass, bricks, mortar, wood, metal fragments from the reinforced concrete, and burning hot pieces of shrapnel from the two bombs whizzed past her head and body, pelting her with such force she nearly lost consciousness.

Her dark coat flew from her hands and was torn into little shreds, her shoes were blown off her feet and disappeared in the dust storm, her hair was yanked around violently, and her dress was practically ripped off her body even as she wore it.

She couldn't hear anything after being so close to the detonation, but she could definitely feel the hard landing. Her already aching body almost cried enough as it was exposed to the bricks and shards of glass she landed on. A second later, the rafters began to rain down upon her from above, and she had to protect her head with her arms.

Shaking her head to get the bees out, she looked over her shoulder to find the men who had been with her, but found nothing or no one. Then she realized she was in an office on the floor below the corridor - she had simply fallen through a hole in the floor.

The body of a German officer was splayed across a desk that had been blown from one end of the room to the other. The hideously mangled state of the body proved that he was no longer among the living.

Breathing in unrestrained gasps from the shock, Vera scrambled to her socked feet and sought a way out of the inferno.

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‘Gold Four, bombs away!’ an excited voice said in Group Captain Roderick's earphones.

He was circling at three hundred feet just to the south of the target to keep a close eye on proceedings. Nodding grimly at Flight Officer Patterson's jubilant remark, he followed the two dark gray cylinders as they went on their final flight into the side of the Shell House. Moments later, they detonated in a red flash, proving they were incendiary.

A huge fireball blasted out of the side of the crippled building, and soon, the long, steeply sloped roof began to sag in the middle. Even as the Group Captain was watching, a large section of the outer wall of the Shell House collapsed and crashed down onto Kampmannsgade.
Having lost their support, the attic and the roof above it soon went down into the offices below that couldn't withstand the added weight. In a matter of seconds, the entire central section of the Shell House had been reduced to rubble, but it hadn't collapsed fully.

"Gold Five, line up! Concentrate your fire on either end of the building," Roderick said into the microphone. Looking around, he couldn't see the fifth Mosquito anywhere so he gained a little altitude to see better.

Thundering above the city buildings in a wide arc, Roderick soon noticed that Gold Five was in trouble: there were several holes made by flak in the starboard wing of the fighter-bomber, and the engine on that side was belching black and pale blue smoke.

'Gold Leader, my controls are damaged. Got hit by flak that came through the floor. Lost my navigator. Need to abort,' the pilot's voice said into Roderick's earpiece.

"Roger, Gold Five. Swing east-south east to the freight yard and drop your eggs there. See you back home," Roderick said, performing another wide sweep to get back to the Shell House in time for Gold Six.

'Roger that, Gold Leader,' the other pilot said and broke off his attack run.

Roderick roared back across the burning Shell House and gained a little altitude to see if they were still being fired upon from the light cruiser Leipzig that had been mooring in the industrial harbor - a carpet of puffs of black smoke in the air from the rapid-fire flak cannons proved they were.

' I predict you'll mostly face small arms fire'," Roderick said, mocking Jørgen Ingvardsen's words from the briefing. "What a load of tosh! He conveniently forgot to tell us about that gunship out there!"

Turning right, Roderick made sure to avoid getting too close to either the light cruiser or the flak cannons that was working overtime at the City Hall Square despite the Mustangs' best efforts.

'Gold Six lining up, Gold Leader. Starting my attack run,' the voice of Flight Lieutenant Clancy said in Roderick's radio.

"Roger that, Gold Six. Like before, concentrate your efforts on either end of the building."

'Roger, Gold Leader. Adjusting my angle of attack to compensate.'

Roderick gained some altitude and swept back towards the Shell House to follow the final bomber of Gold wing. It soon became evident that Gold Six came in from another angle to the others. Instead of following the street like the rest of the wing had done before him, he dove down over St. George's Basin and approached the target nearly on the deck.

At the last moment, he pulled up and released his bombs that took a parabolical flight towards the remains of the building. Only one hit and penetrated the facade, the other dug itself deeply into the sidewalk next to a pillbox at the entrance nearest to the basin.

'Gold Six, bombs away!' Flight Lieutenant Clancy said and let out a whoop. Behind his rapidly climbing Mosquito, the bomb that had gone inside the building detonated in a white flash that once again ripped the guts out of the storey it had landed in. The one that had dug itself into the sidewalk sent the pavement and clumps of dirt and rock hundreds of feet in the air and left a huge, gaping crater in its wake.

"Gold Six, that wasn't particularly accurate! Don't stray too close to the industrial harbor, there's a gunship out there!" Roderick said in a sharp tone.
'Sorry, Gold Leader. Needed to try something different.'

Grunting, Roderick looked down at the destruction. The Shell House was mostly destroyed and the entire central section was on fire, but there was plenty left for Blue Wing and Red Wing to feast on once they got there. "Gold Six, sweep east-southeast to the freight yard and follow the pre-set route home. Meet you on the ground."

'Sweeping right and heading for home, Gold Leader,' Flight Lieutenant Clancy said and performed a graceful banking turn that sent him blasting towards the freight yard.

"Blue Leader, this is Gold Leader. Blue Leader, this is Gold Leader," Roderick said to the following groups, "the coast is clear. Target is burning so you can't miss it. Gold Leader will remain in close contact during your stay."

'Gold Leader, this is Blue Leader,' Squadron Leader Caledon said over the radio. 'We have a fix on the column of smoke. ETA one minute."

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Three minutes earlier.

Still screaming at the top of her lungs, Henriette sprinted along Kampmannsgade to get to the Shell House. The next Mosquito flew past so low that she instinctively reached up and tried to grab hold of it to stop it from dropping more bombs on Vera.

The second pair of detonations were at the other end of the building some three hundred yards from Henriette's position, but the shock wave that rushed across the street was enough to stop her dead in her tracks.

She barely had time to shake her head before the third bomber released its load seemingly just next to where she was standing. The two bombs penetrated the facade of the Shell House and buried themselves inside two offices on the fourth floor just opposite her.

The shockwave that followed the detonation created a wall of burning hot air that was strong enough to singe her skin - then she was blown nearly fifteen feet backwards where she landed in an unruly heap at the foot of a complex of air raid shelters. Every last bone in her body ached from the rough ride but she knew she had to get up to survive.

Groaning and sobbing angrily over the unfairness of it all, Henriette got on her hands and knees and crawled over to the entrance to the air raid shelter that was only a few feet away. She kept banging on the steel door for so long that someone finally relented and opened it. Two men appeared in the door and dragged her inside before they slammed the door shut behind them.

Climbing to her feet, she held onto her aching right elbow that had taken the brunt of the fall. She had skinned her knees and the palms of her hands, but those minor injuries faded into nothing when she noticed a long tear in her favorite tweed jacket. Slamming her jaws together, she let out a long, pained and highly annoyed groan.

The air raid shelter was smelly, poorly lit and overcrowded. Built in the shape of a dome and buried halfway underground, it was designed for seating twenty, but at least thirty if not more had rushed into it instead of spreading out between the three shelters in the complex like they were supposed to. There were four sockets with naked light bulbs hanging down from the curved ceiling, but one was empty, another had gone out, and the remaining two were dim and fairly useless.

Everywhere, babies, children and women were crying, and men were cursing violently over the lack of air raid sirens, the Germans, the Royal Air Force, the war and life in general.
Henriette felt more like cursing than crying, but she didn't want to stand out in the motley crowd, so she staggered over to what was quite clearly the female section of the shelter and sat down on the dusty floor next to an old, frail woman and a teenage girl who was shaking with fear.

The fourth set of detonations sounded differently, but they were still strong enough to rock the air raid shelter and make the sockets hanging down from the ceiling sway back and forth.

A sudden sound akin to rolling thunder was heard from the other side of the street, and it made the involuntary residents strain their hearing to listen.

"Do you think that was the Shell House collapsing? I think it may have been," a trembling female voice said somewhere in the semi-darkness.

'God, I hope not,' Henriette thought but knew better than to say it out loud. If the other people in the air raid shelter even suspected her of being friendly to the Germans - regardless of the reason - she knew she would find herself left to her own devices out on the street faster than she could spell her own name.

Several more loud reports came from the building across the street, but then everything fell quiet - although that was a relative term considering the many warplanes that were tearing around in the sky just above the rooftops.

Nothing seemed to happen for nearly half a minute, but just when Henriette and the others thought it may be safe to venture back outside, a strange, hollow thud that sent a tremble through the air raid shelter was heard from the other side of the street.

"What the hell was that now?" Henriette said, but the words had barely left her lips when the very hell she had spoken of was unleashed on the people staying in the air raid shelter. As the bomb that had dug itself into the pavement detonated, the destructive forces were so great that underground shockwaves flew across the street and hit the air raid shelter head on.

Henriette and the others cried out in terror when they received a knock that seemed to push the entire shelter five feet to the side. A split second later, men, women and children alike created a cacophony of horrified screaming as the light bulbs above them exploded and sent showers of sparks and warm glass fragments down upon them.

One of the benches was torn from its anchors and deposited an entire row of women and children down onto the hard floor, and dust, dirt and the special sound-dampening material used on the domed ceiling rained down upon the people below, making it appear the roof of the shelter was collapsing.

Terrified, Henriette clutched the nearest thing she could find - which proved to be the legs of the young, trembling girl - and just held on for the ride. Clumps of mortar thumped down onto her head, and when she reached up, she noticed for the first time she had lost her black beret somewhere in the fracas.

Finally, after what seemed like an eternity, the air raid shelter settled down and stopped rocking. The four sockets still swayed back and forth violently above them, but by then, nobody cared about that.

"Is anyone injured?" a male voice said from somewhere in the darkness. Several male and female voices answered back that they were. Everyone seemed to fall into a state of silent shock that was only broken by a few crying children.

Henriette just sat there, clutching the young woman's legs with a thousand-mile stare on her face. She was relieved to have survived the air raid, but knew in her heart that Vera couldn't have. A few tears escaped her eyes and ran down her filthy cheeks, but she didn't care. The familiar stench of hot urine suddenly spread through the air raid shelter, and she hoped dearly it wasn't her.
In the background, the air raid sirens began their dragon-like wail, warning the citizens they should seek protection. "About bloody time!" a man shouted, but his trembling, hysterical voice almost defeated the purpose.

High above the air raid shelter, Group Captain Roderick still circled the target. The strong updraft from the fires raging inside the Shell House meant that he'd had to move away by a few hundred feet to keep the flight stable.

In the middle distance, he could already see Squadron Leader Caledon's Blue wing come in on the deck at attack speed, and was about to make a note of that to his navigator when the radio crackled to life.

'Gold Leader, this is Gold Six... I'm in trouble... I got problems, Skip!' 

"Say again, Gold Six?" Roderick said and immediately went into a banking turn that would take him to the freight yard in a hurry.

'I'm in trouble, Gold Leader. I went too low on a strafing run and hit a light post on the freight yard. I've lost part of my tail, and... and... stand by, Gold Leader,' Flight Lieutenant Clancy said with a degree of panic creeping into his voice.

When Roderick reached the open terrain, it didn't take him more than a second to spot a Mosquito with most of the tail section hanging on by the proverbial thread. The pilot was clearly struggling to keep it in the air, but at the same time, he was far too low to bail out.

"Gold Six, this is Gold Leader. I can confirm your problems. Your tail has been damaged."

'I can't control it, Gold Leader! I can't get the damn thing to climb at all!'

While the Flight Lieutenant spoke, his crippled plane just barely cleared the roof of a six-storey building, and it was clear to see he wouldn't make it back to the base. Without warning, the Mosquito stalled and seemed to come to a dead stop in the air though it was still going at more than one hundred miles an hour - then it dropped like a rock and tore through a city street below the rooftops of four and five-storey buildings, tearing chunks out of its fragile wings and bricks out of the far sturdier walls.

At the end of the horrific run, the out of control fighter-bomber ploughed straight into a block of garages right in front of a large red building, destroying everything in its path. As the Mosquito was skidding along the asphalt, sparks from the propellers dragging on the ground ignited the tracers and the rest of the ammunition for the belt-driven machine guns and cannons in the nose of the plane. The fire started small but quickly spread into the garages and along the canvas-bodied airplane until it reached the fuel tanks in the wings.

The resulting explosion ripped the plane - and the crew, who had survived the crash - to bits and sent a huge fireball into the air. The heat and the burning shrapnel went into the few remaining garages that were still standing and ignited drums of oil and gasoline that black-marketeers had tried to keep out of circulation.

The second, even larger explosion produced a mushroom cloud of thick, black smoke that quickly rose into a column several hundred feet tall. Almost at once, the column of smoke was seized by the wind and led over the large, red building behind the block of garages.

"Blasted... Blasted!" Group Captain Roderick said as he performed an evasive maneuver to avoid the cloud of black oil smoke. "Blue Leader, this is Gold Leader. Blue Leader, this is Gold Leader."
'Go ahead, Gold Leader,' Squadron Leader Caledon's voice said in Roderick's ear.

"Blue Leader, we now have two columns of smoke. The target is the camouflaged building just beyond the basin as seen on the model. Not the other column!"

'Roger, Gold Leader. Target is the camouflaged building.'

"Affirmative, Blue Leader."

Cursing under his breath at the unexpected development, Roderick banked to the left so he could get back to the Shell House. Once again, he climbed to an altitude that enabled the flak cannons stationed at the City Hall Square to get him into its sights, but the flak that suddenly appeared around him didn't touch the fragile canvas skin of the Mosquito at all.

As he got back to the Shell House, he could see people running back and forth on the streets in front of the semi-demolished buildings. At the speed he was going, he couldn't make out if they were German soldiers or Danish civilians so he refrained from going down on a strafing run.

Looking up, he noticed that one of their escort Mustangs was in trouble too: dark gray smoke spewed from the engine, and the resulting trail drew abstract patterns across the sky. It was clear to see the pilot was trying to gain enough altitude to bail out, but it was equally clear to see that he wasn't going to.

In the end, the pilot of the Mustang could only get to an altitude of six hundred feet before the engine burst into flame and the plane lost its forward momentum. He rolled the fighter over and dropped out of the cockpit with his parachute already deployed, but the silk hadn't yet fully opened when he disappeared under the rooftops and went out of sight.

'Poor bloke. He might as well have stayed with it,' Flight Officer Cleland said, looking out of the side window. 'Blue wing are on their final approach, Skipper.'

"Roger, nav. I see them," Roderick said, banking left to get back to the Shell House.

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Vera staggered out into the western stairwell on bare feet. A look at the graphics on the wall proved that she really was on the sixth floor, one floor below where she had been before the last explosion. The men she had been with in the attic had not reappeared and she feared they were dead.

She was aching from numerous cuts and scrapes, and her ears were ringing from the loudness of the detonations she had been exposed to, but other than that, she was in relatively good condition.

The same couldn't be said about the staircase. The concrete steps had collapsed down into the stairwell, leaving only the central part where the iron railing snaked its way down to the ground floor.

Vera groaned and clapped her dusty hands over her eyes.

With knocking knees, she stepped over a large chunk of debris and put her foot in between two of the balusters to see if it would hold her weight - it would.

All around her, the remains of the Shell House creaked and groaned like it was about to collapse fully, and it gave her the impetus to carry on.
Letting out a terrified whimper, she put her other foot in between the balusters as well and gripped the iron railing so hard her knuckles and fingers turned white. One step at a time, eight inches at a time, she ventured down the broken stairwell where small clumps of debris rained down upon her every time one of the airplanes roared past above.

At first, she tried to look at anything but the fifty-foot drop she was right next to, but a near-slip that made her bite her lips so hard she drew blood forced her into looking very closely at where she put her feet.

The terrible strain on the muscles in her legs and arms sapped her energy much faster than she had hoped, but she kept going. After what felt like an eternity, she reached the landing between the floor she had been on and the next below it. As the iron railing came around to continue its further descent, there was a larger, flat section that she could lean against.

She took the opportunity to try to get her breath under control, but she had a hard time fighting the shock she was under. A few tears escaped her eyes as she leaned her forehead against the cold iron of the railing that had served her so well on the first part of her hellish voyage.

Looking down, she could see she still had four floors to go before she was at ground level, so she clenched her teeth and set off again, putting her bare feet in between the balusters one step at a time like before.

Suddenly, the very familiar sound of someone working the action on a weapon reached her from below. Gasping, she gripped the iron railing extra tightly while she waited to find out what was going on downstairs.

The answer wasn't long in coming, but when it did, she hoped it was merely a nightmare: Down at ground level some forty feet below her, a German soldier from the guard detail stepped out into the remains of the stairwell with an MP40 submachine gun. He was dusty and bleeding, and he held the weapon ready to fire at anyone he would come across.

So far, the soldier hadn't looked up, but Vera knew it would only be a matter of time before he did - and when he did, she would be too juicy a target for him to ignore.

The soldier cursed violently in a broad, Bavarian accent at anything that flew past in the air, and he raised his weapon several times to fire ineffective potshots at the Mosquitos.

Each time the soldier fired the MP40, Vera jerked in terror which sent pebbles of debris down onto the soldier. He hadn't noticed anything yet, but she knew it couldn't last forever. Pressing her lips together to stop herself from screaming out loud, she continued her voyage downwards.

Another twenty steps further down, she finally made it to the next landing. Trembling uncontrollably, she leaned once again against the larger section of iron inside the turn while she tried to focus on the graphics on the wall. She eventually found out she had reached the fifth floor. Below her, the soldier was still cursing and shooting so she decided to try her luck at the other staircase instead.

Moving her right leg out wide, she put her toes on a piece of the landing that hadn't collapsed, though it appeared to have cracked. The tattered dress fell aside to reveal a thigh that was bloodied, bruised and dirty from the insane endeavor, and she made a pledge to herself right then and there that if she got out of it alive, she would take a four-hour bubble bath in their tub back home - and to share it with Henriette if she possibly could.

The cracked piece of concrete seemed to hold so she took several deep breaths and counted to five - then she pushed herself off the iron railing and onto the landing.

A small piece of concrete fell off as she placed her weight on it, but she held onto the inner door to the fifth floor so it didn't really matter. Hurrying into the corridor, she came face to face with untold destruction: burning papers,
debris from the building, various crushed and twisted furniture from the offices - and worst of all, blood and human remains everywhere.

Her stomach clenched so hard she thought she was going to vomit, but she managed to keep everything inside. The stench of death was so overpowering she could hardly breathe, and she had to pinch her nostrils while she hurried along the corridor, stepping over mutilated bodies and the very Gestapo files the air raid had been sent to destroy.

She suddenly heard a woman crying from one of the offices she went past. At first she kept going, but her conscience demanded that she at least took a look - German or Dane, man or woman, nobody deserved to die in that inferno.


"He- here... I'm here," a young, blonde woman said in Danish, resting on a pile of debris. In her early twenties, she was just as battered and bruised as Vera but she seemed more shell-shocked - and she was wearing a white shirt, a short, black leather tie and a dark gray skirt with a black stripe down the side. In other words, the young woman was wearing the uniform used by the Gestapo secretaries.

Vera stopped dead when she realized the young woman was a collaborator. The hand she was already holding out fell down limply, but her conscience still didn't allow her to walk away from the crying woman.

With a hard, defiant stare, Vera moved into the destroyed office and took the woman by the arm. "Let's go... we can't use the western staircase, we need to go down to the one in the eastern wing."

"All right," the young woman said and got up from the slab of debris she had been sitting on. She was limping on her right leg, but it didn't hamper her progress too much.

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An eternity later, the two women had managed to thread their way through some of the debris from the collapsed floors and had finally arrived at the same stairwell where Vera had taken the elevator ride up to Greinert's office the evening before, though they were obviously still several floors up from the ground level.

The eastern staircase had suffered far less damage than the one at the other end, but the section above them bore several, foot-long cracks in the underside where some of the iron girders were sticking out.

Vera bared her teeth in a grimace when she saw the cracks. "Wait!" she cried when the secretary headed straight for the next section of the stairs. "Wait, we need to be careful... look at those cracks... it could collapse at any moment..."

"We need to get out of here!" the secretary said hysterically, clutching her head. "No, I can't spend another minute in here!" she continued, bounding down the next section of the stairs.

Vera threw her arms in the air at the secretary's carelessness, but the staircase seemed to hold up just fine. Cursing under her breath, she ventured down it far slower than the hysterical secretary had done.

To protect her bare feet, she tried to sweep away the sharp pebbles of debris that had fallen down from the cracks, but she wasn't always successful, and it wasn't long before she left a smattering of blood from her right foot for each step she took.

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As Vera and the secretary moved around the landing approaching the ground floor, she gasped loudly and grabbed hold of the iron railing at the sight of a group of German soldiers who had lined up at the doorway to the guard room, holding various weapons and looking ready to kill anyone looking even vaguely Danish.

Grinding her jaw, Vera grabbed hold of the secretary and pulled her close. "You listen to me now! I helped you before, now you gonna help me... take me by the arm and tell them I'm your prisoner. And then we're gonna walk straight out of here! You understand?"

The secretary turned to Vera and blinked several times in disbelief. "Prisoner? Aren't you a secretary?"

"Do I look like a Gestapo secretary?" Vera growled out of the corner of her mouth.

"Oh my God, you really are a prisoner!"

"Tell them or I'm gonna break your bloody neck! Do you understand?" Vera hissed. She hoped the murderous look she had in her eyes would be enough to convince the young blonde that it wasn't merely bluster, even though it was - since she was a little girl, Vera had barely been able to swat a fly, and she didn't want to find out if she could take a human life, nor what it would feel like.

"I- all right... all right, I'll try..." the secretary said and took Vera by the upper arm.

Together, the two women walked down the final flight of stairs until they were spotted by the soldiers who quickly pointed their rifles at them.

"Look, I've recaptured a prisoner," the secretary said in perfect German.

Vera looked down at the floor so she wouldn't give away the charade, but she could feel the eyes of one of the soldiers burn a hole in her already tattered dress. The mere thought of the angry, bloodied men seeking violent revenge on her sent an ice cold wave of fear over her, but the resulting shiver worked well in the circumstances.

"All right," the Wachtfeldwebel - a Staff Sergeant in the guard detail - said once he had pulled his eyes away from the prisoner's thighs, "we've radioed for reinforcements. We were told they'd be here shortly. Take her outside and wait for them there."

"Yes, Wachtfeldwebel," the secretary said and yanked Vera towards the exit.

A scant second later, they all heard the characteristic roar of a Mosquito coming in on an attack run.

Vera looked out of the glass facade and stared straight at the front of the bomber as it came over the railroad trench and towards the Shell House with its bomb bay doors already open. "Oh... God..." she croaked and tore herself free from the secretary's grip.

Wasting no time, she spun around and sprinted past the staircase and onwards to the rear entrance that led to the inner courtyard and the wooden barrack where she had first been detained.

Behind her, the soldiers roared angry commands that she should stop, but the banshee-like wail of the two bombs racing towards the Shell House spoke louder.

* * *
CHAPTER 9

Circling over the Shell House, Group Captain Roderick watched the bombs of Squadron Leader Caledon - who was in the first plane in Blue wing - sail down towards the glass-facade at the eastern end of the building. The two deadly cylinders landed immediately ahead of the building where they caused plenty of destruction even before they detonated.

When they exploded, the facade lit up in a blinding flash a split second before the entire end of the building seemed to implode. The six-storey tall glass facade covering the end wall of the Shell House disappeared as if by magic and was thrown inside.

'The Squadron Leader won't be pleased by that inaccurate drop, Skipper. On the other hand, all that glass will have caused almost the same amount of damage the bombs would have,' Flight Officer Cleland said, holding onto his seat belts as the Group Captain performed a hard turn to get clear of the flak from the City Hall Square.

"Roger that, nav. I wouldn't want to trade."

'Blue Two, bombs away!' a voice suddenly said into Roderick's earpiece. He recognized it as belonging to Flight Lieutenant Crammond from the 21 Squadron, but when he looked around for the phantom Mosquito, there was nothing to see.

With a surprised grunt, Roderick pulled up straight and keyed the mic. "Blue Leader, Blue Two is nowhere near the target! Where is he?"

Two distant explosions gave the answer. The resulting fireball and debris storm that rose from a site just under a mile from the Shell House proved that Flight Lieutenant Crammond had been confused by the two columns of smoke.

"He's... he's bombed the wrong target! They're bombing the wrong bloody target!" the Group Captain roared into his mic. "Blue Leader, break off the attack! Your wing has the wrong target!"

'Gold Leader, this is Blue Leader. Please say again?'

"Break off the attack! I informed you of the second column and the fact that the correct target is the camouflaged building! Where are your men bombing, Squadron Leader?"

'Stand by, Gold Leader!'

"I'll bloody say!" Roderick said and performed a banking sweep to the left to get closer to the second bombing site. Even before he made it there, another voice came on the crackling radio.

'Blue Three commencing attack run.'

"Do you see him, nav? Is he at the correct target?" Roderick said, craning his neck to find the next Mosquito before it could release its deadly load.

'Don't see him anywhere, Skip!'

Moments later, the message they dreaded was heard over the radio: 'Blue Three, bombs away!'

Roderick briefly took his right hand off the controls to thump it against his leg in frustration. "Blue Leader, this is Gold Leader! Inform your wing to break off the attack! Like I told you before, they have the wrong bloody target!"
Circling around, Roderick could see another fireball mushroom skyward from the wrong site, immediately followed by a cloud of debris that slowly rained back down towards the ground.

'Blue Leader to Gold Leader, Blue Leader to Gold Leader. I've informed Blue Five and Blue Six... but Blue Four apparently has a faulty radio. I cannot reach him, Gold Leader.'

Roderick found the tidbit hard to swallow and he let out a growling groan that left no doubt as to what he thought of the situation.

'Blue Leader to Gold Leader... I'm in trouble. My portside engine has been hit by flak. I'm trailing smoke and fire,' Squadron Leader Caledon suddenly said in a voice that was only moderately panicky.

"Roger, Blue Leader. Head for home if you can," Roderick said, spotting the ailing Mosquito that seemed to want to impersonate a volcano by spewing out globs of fire from the portside engine cowling. "See you on the ground."

'Gold Leader, affirm,' Caledon said before he turned west and stuttered for home.

"What more can go wrong?" Roderick said, adjusting his leather flight helmet.

The 'more' immediately became evident when another fireball rose from the wrong site. A Mosquito blasted straight through the resulting column of smoke and debris but came out on the other side with nary a scratch. It quickly banked right and headed for the freight yard.

"That must be Blue Four," Roderick said and pointed at the radio. "Nav, find the frequency of Blue wing and get in contact with Blue Five and Blue Six. They need to be told the correct target is where I am."

'Roger, Skipper,' the navigator said and began to fiddle with the knobs and dials. Before long, he showed the Group Captain a thumbs-up.

"Blue Five, Blue Six, this is Gold Leader. Please confirm," Roderick said at once, keying the microphone on his throat.

'Blue Five to Gold Leader, confirming. -- 'Confirm, Gold Leader,' the two remaining pilots said.

Roderick performed yet another sweeping turn to get back to the Shell House that wasn't burning as strongly as it had done, the second unfortunate result of the misunderstandings. "Blue Five, Blue Six, the correct target is under my present location. The correct target is the camouflaged building. Can you see me?"

'Blue Five... I have a visual contact, Gold Leader."

"Good. Stand by for now but prepare to commence your attack run. Blue Six, hang back until I tell you to get closer," Roderick said and craned his neck to look out for the two Mosquitos so he wouldn't accidentally get in their way.

'Affirm, Gold Leader. Blue Six here, I do not have visual contact yet, Sir.'

"Don't do anything before you acquire visual contact!" Roderick barked, sweeping around so the pitch black column of smoke from the block of garages and the devastated red building loomed large in his Perspex windows. Grunting in annoyance, he swept back towards the Shell House to be there when Blue Five came in.

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Vera had hoped the inner courtyard would provide shelter for her, but the open square was filled with burning debris that had come off the rear of the Shell House.

Then the two bombs she had been running from hit the ground. From Vera's position flattened up against the brick wall in the courtyard, they sounded differently to the others, but she couldn't be sure. The terrible explosions that followed sent a storm of razor-sharp fragments of glass through the small corridor she had just run through, and even all the way out into the inner courtyard.

Shrieking, she protected her head from the debris and dust that blasted through the rear entrance. The glass fragments that came through the door pelted the cobblestones so hard they created little sparks as they ricocheted off into the distance.

When the shards of glass finally settled down, several prolonged creaks, groans and sighs were heard from the eastern end of the Shell House, and she knew the building wouldn't be able to withstand much more of the torture it had been under.

Inching over to the rear entrance, she peeked inside but could only see endless destruction. The entire corridor past the elevator had been transformed into a wasteland, and it looked like at least one of the cracked sections of the staircase had collapsed down to ground level. There was no sign of the Gestapo secretary nor of the soldiers who had been at the door, but Vera knew they couldn't be alive.

The next problem presented itself immediately - the glass on the floor. Choking back a sob, she looked down at her bare feet and then back up at the millions of glass fragments that littered the carpeted floor from her location at the rear entrance and over to the gaping hole where the glass facade had been only a minute before.

Vera's chin started to quiver dramatically as she looked at the street beyond the gaping hole. Freedom awaited her a mere hundred yards from where she was, but there was no way she could get to it without ripping her feet into bloody chunks.

She sighed deeply and thumped her forehead against the brick wall, resigned to finding another way out through the burning debris littering the inner courtyard. Suddenly, she heard voices speaking in Danish from somewhere inside the building. The voices were followed by crunching sounds that could only come from boots.

Vera peeked around the corner again, not wanting to give herself away if they were Danish collaborators, but the pale, thin men who came out into the corridor from where the guard room had previously been were clearly former prisoners.

"Hey! Hello! Hey!" Vera yelled at the top of her lungs. "Hey! I need your help! I'm trapped here! Hello!"

One of the men - a blond who seemed vaguely familiar to Vera - turned around and waved at her. Before long, he crunched carefully across the glass wearing a pair of acquisitioned German boots that appeared too large for him. When he reached the rear entrance, his face lit up in a smile. "Oh, it's you! It's good to see you again, Miss. We were certain you had died when you fell through the hole in the attic floor."

At first, Vera couldn't penetrate the haze in her mind to think of what the blond man could mean, but then she realized it had been the same man who had seen to her immediately after the first bombs had hit. "Oh... hello. How do you do, I'm Vera Holgersen," she said, instinctively putting out her hand in a polite greeting even though she looked like a streetwalker in a dress that was so tattered it revealed more than it hid.

"Richard Kofoed, how do you do," the man said and returned the greeting.
Hearing the man's name, Vera looked up in surprise. "Oh! You're the son of Johannes Kofoed... the politician? The former Secretary of the Interior?"

"Yes I am. Now-"

"But... but you must have been here for- for more than a month!"

"I have, unfortunately. Miss, I think it's best if we leave at once."

Vera kept staring at the man's pale, drawn face. She broke out in a deep shiver when she thought of what he had been exposed to, but an agonizing groan from the Shell House proved that it was time to leave. "You wouldn't happen to have another pair of boots, would you?" she said with a sad smile.

"I'm afraid not, but... uh... you can hop onto my back. I'll carry you out," Richard said and turned around so Vera could climb onto his back. She did, but her weight almost made the young man's knees buckle.

"Oh, this isn't going to work!" Vera cried, "I'm far too heavy for you..."

"I can manage!" Richard groaned, keeping a firm grip on Vera's dusty, bruised thighs that protruded on either side of his back.

For the first time in a very long time, the hands on Vera's legs belonged to someone else than Henriette, but she wasn't about to complain - especially not when she heard the crunches that were produced by Richard's boots on their way staggering through the demolished corridor.

Arriving at the elevator shaft halfway to the gaping hole, it was clear by Richard's faltering steps and his pained groans that he had reached the end of his strength. Fortunately, another - burlier - man was there, ready to transfer Vera to his back, and before long, the strange caravan continued at an increased pace.

Vera happened to look down at the wrong moment and found herself having to slap a hand over her mouth to stop herself from throwing up all over the back of the man who carried her.

The Wachtfeldwebel and the other soldiers were spread out on the glass-covered floor, but they were all lying on their stomach so Vera couldn't see the extent of their fatal injuries.

The Gestapo secretary she had tried to use for her escape, however, was lying dead on her back in a sea of blood. The bomb blast and the shards of glass had picked most of her flesh clean off her chest, her shoulders and her face.

Shivering, Vera slammed her eyes shut and hoped the nightmare would soon be over. It didn't take long for her to feel a breeze around her body that hadn't been there before. She dared to crack open an eyelid and discovered she had made it - she and the man who carried her had reached freedom, or rather, the completely devastated Kampmannsgade. "Oh God," she croaked, unable to stop a long series of sobs from bubbling up to the surface.

"Are you all right up there?" the man carrying Vera said, taking another few steps to the side to get clear of the worst debris.

"Y- yeah..."

"I'm putting you down now," the man said and crouched down so Vera could hop off.

Vera stepped back from her helper and rubbed her face repeatedly. The environment outside the Shell House was less dangerous than inside, but only just - several bombers were still circling in the sky above them, and the flak
batteries were still firing away from the City Hall Square. To compound the misery of the people who had made it to safety, two German trucks came roaring up Vestre Farimagsgade with a motorcycle escort.

"Bloody hell!" Vera's helper roared and grabbed her by her arm. "Come on! We gotta get to the other side of the street! The Germans are coming!"

Vera only had time to blurt out a surprised "Whoa!" before she found herself hauled across Kampmannsgade. Once she and the others had gone into hiding behind a row of columns, they couldn't agree on which way to go. Where the men quickly ran further down Vestre Farimagsgade in the opposite direction of the approaching trucks, Vera set off to the air raid shelters she knew were only two hundred yards up Kampmannsgade. It meant she had to run out in the open, but it was a far shorter distance.

The debris on the street hurt her bare feet but since a bullet in the back would hurt far more, she kept up the frantic pace until she tore around the corner of Kampmannsgade and Nyropsgade and came up to the cast iron door protecting the first of three air raid shelters.

"Open up! Please open up!" she shouted, pounding on the solid metal door. "They're coming for me! Please open up!"

When nothing happened, Vera let out a pained cry and took off further down Nyropsgade to try one of the other two shelters.

Behind her, the two trucks had arrived at the ruins of the Shell House and it didn't take long for a whole squad of men to pour out of them - but just when the soldiers had lined up to go inside, a Mosquito came screaming down towards them on an attack run.

Inside the air raid shelter, Henriette whipped her head around and stared wide-eyed at the cast iron door. The female voice that had pleaded to be let in had been so similar to her partner's it was uncanny. She slowly got to her feet and moved over to the door like in a trance.

A strong vibe in her heart told her that she needed to see for herself, and she suddenly hurried forward to undo the door's latches. A few feet away from it, a man stepped in her path and held her back by putting his hands on her shoulders.

"Get out of my way, you worthless sack of potatoes!" Henriette screamed, threatening the man with two clenched fists. "I swear to God, I'm gonna make you wish you never crossed me! Get out of my way! I need to be out there!"

"Lady... you're crazy! If you open that door, we'll all die!" the man barked back at her. In his late thirties, his clothes - a dark gray fedora, expensive shoes, an expensive coat and a dark gray suit over a white shirt - gave him an air of a businessman who had simply chosen the wrong moment to go out for his regular oyster lunch. He had an expression on his face that said he was more than a little displeased with sharing an air raid shelter with commoners, even if the shoulders of his expensive coat had been splattered with the same clumps of dirt and the sound-dampening material that had rained down on all of them.

Henriette was only moderately successful in holding back a growl as a response. Spinning around, she looked at the other residents of the air raid shelter to get some help but quickly realized she was on her own - everyone made sure to mind their own business.

"Look, Mista," she said in a low, dangerous tone, "I don't care who you are or what you say... I'm going out there. Now. If you want to stay here, be my guest... but I'm going. Now get the hell out of my way, fancy Dan!"
Reaching past the businessman, Henriette started working the latches for the heavy cast iron door. She could hear cries of outrage from some of the others, but she didn't care - she needed to go out to find Vera if it killed her.

She groaned out loud as she swung the heavy door aside. When it came to an abrupt halt at the door stop, her own momentum nearly made her fall over, but she quickly stood up straight and looked outside. The thunderous roar of a Mosquito on an attack run echoed between the tall buildings, and she knew she had to hurry. Stepping outside onto Kampmannsgade, she slammed the metal door shut and heard it get locked even before she'd had time to take but a single step away from it.

Kampmannsgade was the very definition of pandemonium. Debris from the Shell House was scattered everywhere, some of it burning, some of it not. On the other side, a bloodied German soldier held up an MP40 submachine gun that he fired blindly against the Mosquito that bore down upon him - not that it did him any good.

A whole squad of men scurried away from two Opel Blitz trucks that were parked outside the spot where the main entrance to the Shell House had been, and some of them fired their rifles at the approaching fighter-bomber, too.

Henriette bent over to present the smallest target she possibly could and ran around the first of the air raid shelters to see where the woman who had sounded so much like Vera had gone. When she cleared the shelter, she couldn't see her partner's characteristic figure anywhere, and she had to gulp down a large lump of fear upon realizing she may have made a bad mistake.

Her situation went from bad to worse when the Mosquito dropped its bombs. The whistling of the two cylinders as they flew towards their target made her throw herself flat onto the packed ground between the air raid shelters and hurriedly bury her head in her hands.

She tried to remember some of the ten rules on what to do if caught out in the open during an air raid, but all she could think of was the fourth one - lie flat on the ground and keep your mouth open to protect your eardrums.

When the detonation came, it was far worse than it had been inside the shelter. The ground shook under her body, the shockwave blasted through her hair and her clothes, and the wall of noise was so massive she had to let out a pained squeal as she tried to press her face as far down into the dirt as possible.

Panting hard, Henriette waited for several seconds before she dared to look up. One of the trucks had been blown over and was burning in the middle of the street, and the other had had its tarpaulin torn to shreds and its windows blown out. Apart from a German helmet rolling around among the debris, there were no signs of the squad of men nor of the single soldier who had been firing his MP40 at the airplanes.

Even before she'd had time to fully take in the destruction of the Shell House, another Mosquito came in from another angle. It too dropped its bombs, and Henriette dug herself even further into the ground, cursing and swearing at the inconvenience of it all.

The second pair of detonations were different as a clear, white flash shone brightly inside the remains of the building. Moments later, a fireball exploded out of the facade that sent a wave of heat over Henriette and her surroundings along with yet another wall of ear-splitting noise.

After the incendiary devices had detonated, the Shell House swayed back and forth like it didn't know whether to stay up or fall down. It eventually decided on falling down and began to collapse, floor by floor, section by section, office by office, all along its length.

At the end, everything came down with a thunderous roar; an avalanche of bricks, plaster and iron girders blew a huge cloud of dust across the street that engulfed everything and left all surfaces coated in a fine layer of grayish-brown grains.
Coughing, hacking and spluttering, Henriette covered her eyes and her mouth to avoid getting a faceful of the dust storm, but it was hard going. Behind her, someone else coughed and spluttered, too.

Even before the dust cloud had dissipated fully, Henriette moved around onto her rear and began to brush the gunk out of her hair. She was about to move on when she happened to look up.

"Gaaah!" she cried, jerking backwards when she realized that a tall, dark-haired figure was standing above her - a tall, dark-haired figure who had more than a passing resemblance to Vera, except the figure was wearing a torn, tattered dress that Vera would quite simply never wear. "Vera? Love, is that really you?" she croaked, shielding her eyes from the sun that broke through the dust cloud at the exact same moment.

"It's me," Vera said in a trembling voice as she knelt down on the ground. At first, Vera and Henriette could only stare at each other; stare at their dusty, filthy appearances, at their ruined clothes, at their skinned hands and knees, at the numerous cuts and bruises that littered their skin, and finally at their faces that showed they had both seen and experienced things that would stay with them for a long time.

Ever since Vera had been taken by the Germans, Henriette had expected their reunion to be filled with wild, unbridled jubilation, but now that the other half of her soul had finally returned, all she wanted to do was to hold her until the end of the world. "Please hold me... please let me know you're real," she whispered, putting out her arms to invite her partner into a hug.

Vera wasn't about to turn down the plea and she slipped forward until she could reach around Henriette's body. With a quivering chin, she pulled the blonde woman into a quiet, sincere and heartfelt embrace. To feel Henriette's strong body pressed against hers after all she had been through was a near-religious experience for her, and she tightened her grip, knowing the feisty blonde could withstand the pressure.

As the emotions caught up with Vera, the dam finally broke and tears began to roll down her filthy cheeks, leaving curious, zig-zagging lines in the grime. Harder and harder she cried, and harder and harder she squeezed her love to let her know that whatever else would happen, she would always be so close they wouldn't be able to fit a stamp between them.

As Henriette felt her partner's strong arms give her the squeeze of a lifetime, she finally allowed herself to let her soft heart take control over her hard shell. A single tear escaped her eyes; a tear that was soon followed by many, many more. Before long, her compact body was racked with sobs, each attempting to cleanse the pain and the stress from her being.

Vera finally pulled back and looked Henriette in the eye. "I love you so much I can't even begin to explain it," she whispered, trying to wipe a bit of grime off Henriette's face but giving up almost at once.

"And I love you... I love you with all my heart," Henriette croaked in a raw voice. She finally had time to take a better look at her lover, but when the extent of her injuries came into view, she almost wished she hadn't: Vera's legs had cuts, purple bruises and angry red abrasions everywhere, from the soles of her bare feet to above the hem of the tattered dress. Her hands and arms weren't better, but what really sent Henriette's stomach churning was a black, evil-looking bruise right on her sternum that was visible through her torn camisole.

"My... God..." Henriette croaked, tenderly separating the torn camisole to see better. "What did those rotten bastards do to you? Did they- did they..."

"No, love," Vera said in a calm voice, subconsciously understanding her partner's unsaid fears. "No, they didn't. They hit me with some kind of metal rod. The lung, the spine, the sternum... and they slapped me. But that was all."
Henriette opened her mouth to give thanks, but she couldn't get a word across her lips. Getting to her feet, a despondent shake of the head was all she was able to do - that and to put out her arms in another silent plea for affection.

The call was heeded at once and the two women went back into each other's arms for another comforting, soul-soothing hug.

"Oh, I'm... I'm crying again," Henriette said between sobs. "I haven't cried this much f- for years... but I'm just so happy to see you again... you are really here, right? I mean, I'm not just talking to myself, am I?"

"I'm here, love," Vera said and leaned down to claim Henriette's lips in a strong kiss - dust, grime, soot and tears be damned. Separating, Vera chuckled at the gobsmacked look on Henriette's face. "What?"

"We never kiss in public..."

"The situation called for it," Vera said and tried again to remove some of the dust from her partner's hair.

Henriette chuckled at her partner's affections and helped them along by shaking her head. She briefly stared at the huge amounts of muck that came out of her hair before she looked back up. "Thank you," she whispered, wiping her eyes.

"You're welcome."

There were still bombers circling high in the sky, and Vera and Henriette both looked up when they heard the characteristic engine note of one of the Mosquitos change as the airplane went into a banking turn.

"Darling, what do you say we try to get home?" Vera said and put a warm hand on Henriette's dusty cheek. "Uh... if-we still have a home...?" she added with a furrowed brow.

"We do. I was there this morning. I've spent two nights down in the bicycle storage room in case the Nazi pigs came for me. But they didn't... did they ask you any questions?" Henriette said while she craned her neck to look out for the bombers.

"Not really... a few. I didn't say anything," Vera said and suddenly looked away. "Well... maybe I did say something. But not about you! I'd rather die than betray you..."

Henriette scrunched up her face as she waited for Vera to go on. When the tall woman seemed to withdraw into herself, Henriette hooked an arm inside Vera's and pulled her close. "Love?"

"I said a few things about Jørgen. I figured he had the experience to deal with it if they came for him," Vera said, still looking away from her partner.

"Love... hey... c'mere," Henriette said and pulled Vera even closer. "Vera, that... that... that asshole doesn't deserve any compassion. He was bad for us... for Birthe that he led on and just dumped like a bad apple... for the Knitting Club as a whole. We should never have gone down that path... or followed that part of the plan. He killed a man in cold blood... can you believe that?"

"What? Who?"

"The drunken fisherman! With cya-"
"...Cyanide... God, one of the German officers mentioned that several times," Vera said and shook her head slowly. "Almonds... they could smell almonds on the dead man. Cyanide smells like almonds... I guess."

"Huh, I don't know... oh well, that's all in the past now. We can-"

Both women jumped a foot in the air when a loud - and by now very familiar - sound of a Mosquito straining its engines reached them. Looking around, they could see a new group of six bombers approaching the remains of the Shell House over the basin with what seemed to be a dozen escort fighters close by.

"Oh... my... God..." Henriette breathed as she saw the airplanes. "Another another wave... we need to get away... we need to get the hell away from here... now! Now, Vera! Can you run with your bare feet?"

"Yes..."

"Let's run! Uh... down Nyropsgade... head for home!" Henriette cried and grabbed Vera's hand. A second later, the two women hurried down the street to get out of harm's way before the third wave could drop their deadly loads of high explosives and incendiary bombs.

"*#*#

Up in the sky, Group Captain Roderick looked down at the completely demolished Shell House and let out a triumphant whoop. The entire building - from end to end as well as every structure in the inner courtyard - had collapsed and had been reduced to a grotesque heap of twisted iron, crumpled concrete and broken glass. In several places among the ruins, flames rose that seemed to be fueled by ruptured gas mains.

"I'd call that a success, nav. There's nothing left of those Gestapo archives. Mission accomplished," Roderick said as he craned his neck to look for Red wing.

'Mission accomplished indeed, Skip,' the navigator said, making a note on his maps.

"Red Leader, this is Gold Leader. Red Leader, this is Gold Leader," Roderick said as he spotted the final wave of the attack coming into sight over the basin to the west.

'This is Red Leader. Go ahead, Gold Leader,' Wing Commander McCallum's voice said in Roderick's earpiece.

"Red Leader, abort, abort, abort. The target has already been destroyed. Repeat, abort, abort, abort, Red Leader."

"Red Leader, affirm. Aborting. Congratulations, Gold Leader. Red wing will continue to the freight yard and pepper the tracks to give Jerry a headache elsewhere, too. Then we'll head for home."

"Roger that, Red Leader. Watch for the tall light post at the freight yard and the flak posts at the City Hall Square."

"Roger, Gold Leader. I'll alert the wing."

Immediately following the exchange, several of the escort Mustangs broke off from the main group and headed for the City Hall Square to cover the departure of the Mosquitos. All six airplanes of Red wing broke off the run and swung right towards the freight yard, climbing to get over the tall buildings that stood between them and the safe zone for dropping their bombs.

The only Mosquito that continued onto the Shell House was the one from the RAF Film Unit, and that came in low and slow to capture the utter destruction on camera so it could be evaluated and used for future missions.
"I think we've done what we came for, nav. It's time to see if we can find Fersfield," Roderick said and leveled out.

'Roger, Skipper. Fersfield is at two-seven-four degrees.'

"Two-seven-four degrees, roger."

Minding the Film Unit Mosquito, Group Captain Roderick performed a banking turn over the target to take a final look at the former headquarters of the Gestapo. Satisfied with what he saw, he turned to the correct heading for RAF Fersfield and climbed to the slightly saner altitude of a hundred and sixty-five feet. Pushing the engine controls forward, he increased the speed to two hundred and ninety knots to make it more difficult for any flak posts along the way to zero in on them.

Once he was flying level, he glanced at his watch and noted that it was ten past twelve. All in all, the raid had been carried out in twenty-five minutes which was about standard.

After checking the horizon and the cityscape closest to them for puffs of flak and finding none, his thoughts turned to the cock-up involving Flight Lieutenant Clancy's crash landing at the red building in Gold Six. 'It's unfortunate the young man was killed,' Roderick thought, 'but he was flying far too recklessly. He would certainly have been given a stern telling-off once we got back. He was too low, even after being warned of the dangers. And the others bombed the wrong target despite being told several times the proper target was the only camouflage building in the entire city... blasted, that red building looked like a hospital, or even worse, a school. Well. I guess we'll find out.'

'Red Leader to Gold Leader, Red Leader to Gold Leader,' Wing Commander McCallum's voice said in Roderick's ear.

"Go ahead, Red Leader," Roderick said, keeping an eye on the horizon around him.

'Red wing is heading for home. We lost Red Three. A mobile flak cannon arrived at a bridge near the freight yard just when we did. Several were hit but only Red Three was unable to continue. He lost his portside engine and the cockpit canopy. He headed out over the Øresund where he bailed out.'

"Roger, Red Leader. Stay alert on your way home."

'Roger that, Gold Leader. See you at home.'

"Affirm, Red Leader. Gold Leader out," Roderick said, shaking his head at the loss of yet another plane - not to mention the crew. The mission had been a success, but it had come at a very high price indeed.

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Seven hundred yards down Nyropsgade, Vera and Henriette realized something was wrong when they saw the billowing column of pitch black smoke rising from somewhere to the west of where they were.

Reaching the slightly rundown Saturn Hotel at the corner of Nyropsgade and Gammel Kongevej, the busy boulevard that ran past their home, they could see that everybody seemed to be hurrying west on the boulevard, towards the smoke. In the far distance, they could hear the characteristic ringing bells of the emergency vehicles, but they weren't able to pinpoint the exact source of the smoke.

"What the hell's going on over here...? Some kind of fire?" Henriette mumbled as she leaned forward to put her hands on her knees so she could catch her breath.
"Ouch... ouch, ouch, ouch!" Vera said, hopping around on her left foot while digging pebbles out of her right.
"Ouch... I can't believe I lost my shoes... they were so comfortable. I'll never get such a nice pair of shoes again."

"I'd rather have you lose your shoes than your head, love," Henriette mumbled.

"Well... that's true."

Behind them, the overweight concierge from the Saturn Hotel - wearing a well-worn set of dark pants, white shirt and a diamond-patterned vest that had lost most of its luster - stepped out onto the sidewalk and lit a Powhhattan cigarette. "Oy, what's happened to you?" he said in a squeaky voice the second he clapped his eyes on Vera.

"Long story, Mista," Henriette said surly.

"I asked her, toots," the man said, gawking at Vera's bruised thighs.

Vera - knowing that Henriette reacted strongly to such language even when everything was going well - decided to step in before the conversation would spill over into an argument. "I was caught in the blast from one of the bombs up at the Shell House. Look, it tore my dress in half!"

"Oh, I'm lookin' all right... no shit?"

"No," Vera said and tried to close the tattered pieces of her dress so she wouldn't be so exposed.

The concierge grunted and knocked some ash off his cigarette while he looked back out at the reams of people hurrying up Gammel Kongevej. "Yeah. I heard the bangs. Those flyboys sure didn't aim too well today. They hit a block of garages and the French School... you know, the Catholic school over on Maglekildevej? Wiped it out."

"And you know that how, Mista?" Henriette growled.

"The state broadcasting service is transmitting live right now. Sounds like it's a slaughterhouse. The flyboys did a really great job there," the man said, knocking off some more ash.

Narrowing her eyes, Henriette drew a deep breath while she weighed the pros and cons of sparring verbally with the overweight man. In the end, she decided to go for it. "Oh yeah? And something else... how did you get so portly, Mista? Didn't you notice the food rationing we've had for the past five years? Let me guess, you got that fat gut from the black market, right?"

"Henriette..." Vera tried, but before she could break through to her partner, the concierge shrugged nonchalantly and let out a cloud of reeking, pale blue smoke from the notoriously smelly Powhhattan cigarette.

"Mmmm? Well, wouldn't you like to know, toots."

The concierge's behavior got to Henriette and she simply walked away from him before she lost her temper completely. When she reached the boulevard, the man's story was confirmed by the buzz that did the rounds between the many people who were hurrying up the boulevard on bicycles or on foot - some were going to help, some merely to gawk.

"Jesus," Henriette whispered, realizing that she was partly to blame for the tragedy. Her chin began to tremble again and she rubbed it angrily to stop herself from crying for the third time in less than ten minutes.

"Love," Vera whispered, sensing her partner's shock, "that wasn't your fault. I'm sure they would have bombed the Shell House even without our input..."
Henriette just shook her head. "I doubt it. Remember the other time we sent word to Mr. Frederiksen? He said that we didn't have anywhere near enough to call the SOE. It was only based on Lilly's letter that we... God... Lilly... she would..." Henriette said in a voice that trailed off into a faint whisper. "She would have been at work at this time of the day... oh, no."

Rubbing her brow, Henriette did cry for the third time in ten minutes, but it was for her old friend rather than for the people at the school. "I've known Lilly for more than twenty years... she was my neighbor when we were little girls. We were best friends forever and ever... love, did you see Lilly while you were there? You know... short-haired brunette... my height... pert nose... hazel eyes, real pretty... her right eyelid is drooping slightly...?"

Vera broke out in a shiver when an image of the blonde Gestapo secretary - and especially her fate - entered her mind's eye. 'Unless Lilly had called in sick or something, chances are she was killed in the attack... or perhaps when the building collapsed,' she thought, biting her cheek. "No. I'm sorry," she said after a few seconds, pulling her partner into a consolatory hug.

"Oh hell," Henriette said and sighed so deeply her shoulders slumped.

Vera didn't have anything to wipe away the tears that streamed down Henriette's face and she didn't want to kiss her either, not with so many people on the boulevard, so the only thing left for her to do was to give her partner another hug. "Darling, I really, really need to get some rest... and to wash some of this muck off my body... and get something to eat if I can... I've hardly eaten since... since I don't know when. How about we go home before the boulevard clogs up completely? Not to mention before we're spotted by a German or a HIPO patrol?"

"Yeah. We can't stay here. I need... I need to have a drink," Henriette said and wiped her eyes. "We still have the British brandy. I think I'll have a shot of that. A double. Yeah."

* * *

CHAPTER 10

As always, Henriette checked the notice board just inside the door for any possible messages she needed to know about, but the janitor hadn't put up anything. The only note there was from Lydia Thorbjørnson who was apparently selling a 'Mattress, as new and hardly used. Slight stain.'

Moving up the staircase of their apartment building, Vera and Henriette both created a trail of dust and little stones from the various misadventures they had been involved in, but they were too much in a hurry - and too tired - to do anything about it.

When they reached their front door, Henriette put her ear to it like she always did. Everything inside seemed quiet so she inserted the key into the lock, twisted it and opened the door, doing everything as quiet as she could so she wouldn't alert the others in the building.

A peek into the narrow hallway proved they were alone, and she quickly took Vera's hand and pulled her inside. "We're safe... for now," she whispered. "You need hot water more than I do so go ahead and use the bathroom first. I'll find some new clothes for us and:-"

That was all Henriette had time to say before Vera jumped into her arms and offered her the strongest, rawest and most emotional kiss they had ever shared. Moaning out their gratitude of being back in each other's arms, the two women simply gnawed at their partner's mouth in a bruising, ferocious kiss that purged their pains and fears through the wild, unrestrained contact.
The raw kiss eventually drew to a close with the two of them resting their foreheads against each other's, panting like crazy and wearing expressions that said they had just woken up from the worst nightmare imaginable.

"Baby," Vera whispered, reaching up to trace Henriette's bruised lips with an index finger, "we can't stay here. Even if the Gestapo archives are gone, the HIPOs still know about me. They saw my ID when I was arrested. They know where we live..."

"I guessed as much," Henriette said and reached around her lover's tattered dress. "I'll call Mr. Frederiksen. He'll know where we can stay. We better pack a few essentials. God only knows how long this war will last..."

"Good idea," Vera said and leaned in to give Henriette another brief kiss meant to make up for the earlier bruising. "While you do that, I'll get washed. I had fantasized about sharing a bubble bath with you, but I fear that'll have to wait for a while. I'll do it really quick, then you can get refreshed. I'll save some hot water for you. All right?"

"All right, precious," Henriette said and stole yet another kiss just to make up for lost time.

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Wearing Vera's house coat, Henriette pulled a chair over to the mahogany sideboard and took the notepad and a pencil. Crossing her legs, she drew a very deep breath that filled her lungs with clean air to prepare herself for the conversation that would follow. "Hello Operator, I would like Atlas seven-seven-six-two, please," she said into the heavy receiver.

'Connecting, please wait,' a mature female voice said. A few clicks and hisses followed before the line went silent.

'The Frederiksen residence,' a young female voice suddenly said at the other end of the connection.

"Hello. My name is Henriette Brandt and I would like to speak to Mr. Frederiksen, please.'

'One moment, please.'

As the line went silent, Henriette used the opportunity to look over her shoulder at the closed bathroom door. Vera had said she had fantasized about sharing a bubble bath, and Henriette had to admit it was an intriguing prospect.

'Hello, Miss Brandt. It's Hans-Otto Frederiksen,' their controller said, making Henriette snap back around and hold the pencil ready.

"Hello, Mr. Frederiksen. Well, I have good news and bad news. The good news is that the books on the ancient Amazon Queen Hippolyta have finally showed up. Turns out they had been delivered to the wrong address, but everything has been sorted now. Just in time, too... I mean, with the warehouse they came from burning down and all."

'Oh, that's good to hear, Miss Brandt.'

"Yes, but the bad news is the information we've already extracted has proved to be so pressing we need to relocate until further notice. We're quite frankly jumping to delve deeper into extrapolating the information from the new material."

'Oh... I see. Hmmm. Well, I hear Valle Verde is wonderful this time of the year. We have a cottage there you can use. It's quite spartan, but...'

"Oh, that'll be just fine for us, Mr. Frederiksen. Valle Verde?" Henriette said and scribbled down the coded message.
'Valle Verde, that's correct. I trust you already have the necessary paperwork?'

"We do, Mr. Frederiksen. Thank you... thank you very much. Goodbye."

'Goodbye, Miss Brandt,' their controller said and hung up.

Henriette stared at the coded words 'Valle Verde.' She knew they were a reference to a safe house in one of Copenhagen's suburbs, the Grøndal - the direct Danish translation of the Spanish words.

"Grøndal," she mumbled, getting off the chair and down on her knees. Opening one of the wings of the sideboard, she rummaged through a ton of papers before she found a deciphering letter Hans-Otto Frederiksen had sent them in 1943 when they entered the active resistance for the first time. "Grøndal... all right," she muttered, running her finger down a list on a particular page until it reached the exact address.

Tapping the index finger on the paper, she nodded and found a box of matches to destroy the evidence.

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Five minutes later, Vera stepped out of the bathroom swept in a towel. She had been through an extra-hasty stand-up-bath but it would have to do until later - the worst of the grime had come off which was the most important thing. "Love?" she said, looking around for signs of the missing Henriette.

'In here!' a muffled voice said from the bedroom.

Sweeping her damp hair away from her forehead, Vera pulled up in the towel and padded into the bedroom on bare feet that were so sore she could hardly walk straight.

Henriette was leaning over two opened suitcases on the bed, packing piles of fresh underwear, hygiene products and assorted other doodads they would need in the safe house. "Hi again... oh, you look much better clean," she said, though her gray, dead-tired face detracted from the flirting.

"Why, thank you. Lord above, I can't tell you how much I'm looking forward to a little nap... and baloney on rye." Smiling, Vera took off the towel and used it to dry the final, damp strands of hair.

Her naked body was marred by the numerous cuts, bruises and abrasions she had received in escaping from the Shell House, but in particular by the deep purple bruise that had blossomed out over her sternum. When she turned around to find some underwear, a new camisole and a petticoat in their closet, the two equally ugly bruises on her back came into full view.

"Oh God... oh God, love," Henriette said, grimacing in pain when she saw the bruises. "What did those filthy pigs do to you? Look at your back!" she said, quickly closing the distance between herself and her partner. She ran a hand across the evil-looking bruise covering the central part of Vera's spine though she didn't want to press too hard in case it was still tender. "And your lung... those... those stinking animals! Those rotten sons of bitches!" she cried, pulling the naked Vera into a hug from behind.

"It's all right, darling. All things considered, I was lucky... I got off lightly," Vera said and turned around to pull Henriette into a real hug. "The man who interrogated me was called Horst Greinert. He was a pig, but... but I was lucky that Standartenführer Heidenreich took over part of the interrogation... he only slapped me."

"Heidenreich? The... what did Ingvarsen call him...? The Oberst der Polizei?"
"Yes, the true leader of the German police units in Denmark... I... well, I guess I lied to him. I told him the SOE had an agent in the country who was planning to kill Werner Best... Jørgen Ingvarde... that's why they didn't continue the interrogation," Vera said in a voice that became more and more shaky as she went along. "They wanted to interrogate me again after lunch today, so Greinert sent me upstairs to the holding cells in the... in the attic. If he hadn't, I would have been downstairs in the offices when the... when the..."

As the realization of what had happened - and what had so nearly happened - dawned on Vera, her chin started quivering quite badly and it wasn't long before she started crying. Her knees began to wobble, and suddenly, it was only Henriette's strong arms that held her up.

Working together, the two women shuffled over to the bed where Henriette pushed the suitcases aside to make room. Once everything was ready, she helped Vera to sit down while she held her by the hands.

The house coat quickly came off Henriette's shoulders and was put to far better use around the crying, vulnerable Vera; then Henriette helped her partner down to lie flat on her back before she crawled up next to her and held her tight. "Let it all go... let it all go, Vera. I love you and I'll never let you leave me again," Henriette whispered, stroking Vera's tear-stained face and silky-smooth hair.

An hour later, Vera had rested, settled down and cried again from Henriette bringing her a rye-and-grease with the two halves covered by a slice of cheese and a slice of smoked baloney that they had saved in the pantry for a special occasion.

Wiping her hands on a tea towel, Henriette slipped into the living room and sat down by the telephone. She pondered for nearly a minute whether or not to call Rigmor Nørby-Henriksen, the oldest member of the Knitting Club, before she decided to go ahead with it. 'She, Sussi and Birthe deserve to know that Vera is all right,' she thought as she reached for the heavy receiver.

"Hello Operator, I would like Øbro four-one-eight-four, please."

'Connecting, please wait,' a mature female voice said at the other end of the line. Like always, a few clicks and hisses followed before the phone was picked up.

'Mrs. Nørby-Henriksen speaking,' Rigmor's familiar voice said.

"Good afternoon, Mrs. Nørby-Henriksen. This is Henriette Brandt."

'Ooh hello, Miss Brandt... do you have any news? I followed the air raid in my binoculars... it looked frightening."

"It was even worse from over here. And yes, I do have good news. Ares didn't defeat Queen Hippolyta after all," Henriette said, using the Greek code they knew so well. "There was a minor bit of discoloring, but nothing a little love and elbow grease couldn't cure."

'Ooh... oh, that's wonderful, just wonderful news, Miss Brandt! You had us all so worried."

"I was worried, too, Mrs. Nørby-Henriksen. I trust you will relay my message to our friends?"

'I will! I will indeed, Miss Brandt. Can I tempt you to come over for a cup of tea?"
"I'm afraid not, Mrs. Nørby-Henriksen," Henriette said and looked over her shoulder at Vera who had stepped into the living room in a very nice outfit. "You see, we're about to disembark on an expedition. We have no idea how long it will take, I'm afraid."

'I understand. Well. Best of luck with everything. To both of you,' Rigmor Nørby-Henriksen said in a tone that told Henriette the older woman knew exactly what was going on between she and Vera. 'Goodbye, Miss Brandt.'

"Goodbye, Mrs. Nørby-Henriksen," Henriette said and hung up. Sighing, she went straight for their drinks cabinet.

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A short while later, Henriette knocked back the last of the double brandy she had promised herself. The strong liquor burned its way down her throat in a way that nearly made her regret chucking it down like that. "Lord, what a kick," she said and wiped her lips with the back of her fingers.

Vera decided to sip her drink instead of gulping it down, and she was able to taste the expensive drops far better. Her strength had returned since her breakdown in the bedroom though she was still quite pale and shaky. "I'm ready," she said, tapping her foot against her suitcase. She was wearing black, padded shoes, white bobby socks, a sensible, tan dress and the last of her dark winter coats - it had been put aside during the winter months when the left sleeve had come loose, but a little application of needle and thread had put everything back together.

The living room floor had in fact resembled a tailor's workshop because Henriette had also used the needle and thread to fix her favorite tweed jacket. The tear was still visible, but all in all, it was as good as new.

She missed her black beret, but a suitable replacement had been found in the closet - a pale brown hat with a feather that went well with the colors of her jacket. To round off the ensemble, she was wearing a sensible dress like her partner, though hers was dark brown instead of tan.

The strange conformity of the importance of dressing well in the middle of pure chaos and confusion made Henriette shake her head repeatedly. "I'm ready too... we might as well be going, then. God, I hope nothing will happen to the apartment while we're away... we've worked too hard to get here to lose it all now."

"I agree, love," Vera said, looking around at their precious belongings. "If we're lucky, the war will be over in a few weeks' time. Maybe a month..."

Henriette followed her partner's gaze around the apartment but decided it was too painful, so she put down her glass and took her suitcase instead. "I think we spent all our luck earlier today, Vera."

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Vera and Henriette tip-toed down the staircase, but Lydia Thorbjørnson's radar was pinging as always and she stepped out onto the landing when they went past her door. "Oh, hello! Oh, have you heard the latest?" Lydia said, stuffing her hair up into her pale green dust bonnet that clashed quite severely with her red apron. "Goodness me, they bombed the Shell House! Yes, indeed! They actually bombed the Shell House..."

"Well, we sort of." Vera said.

"Looks like they bombed the French School as well, though. The state broadcasting service is reporting more than ninety casualties... nuns and children. What a tragedy. Oh, are you leaving?"

"We."
"Oh, where have you been for the past few days? I haven't heard anything from your apartment... not that I'm eavesdropping, of course, ha ha."

"We've been busy, Mrs. Thorbjørnson," Henriette said surly, putting down her heavy suitcase.

"Oh! Did you see my note down on the message board? Oh, it's a brand new mattress, only used maybe ten or fifteen nights. It's the one me and Poul use but we couldn't agree on it. Oh, Poul likes a soft bed but I like them hard... like my men, ha ha. Not that *that* particular attribute applies to Poul... but he does what he can, the poor bloke. Oh, but where's my head? Of course you don't share a double bed! Goodness me, I'm sorry for even suggesting it. You obviously have two separate beds."

"Mmmm-yes, something to that effect," Henriette said, biting both cheeks at the same time. "Mrs. Thorbjørnson... Lydia, we-"

"Oh, wait, how about a cup of coffee? Or what they call coffee these days, anyway. I managed to trade a couple of old books for a coffee stamp. So I could-"

"No thank you, Mrs. Thorbjørnson," Henriette said and picked up her suitcase. "We really need to get doing. We're staying with Miss Holgersen's relatives in Nørresundby for a couple of weeks and we don't want to be late for the train."

Lydia looked from Henriette to Vera and back again. Her face suddenly lit up in a smile when she remembered a funny story - "Oh! Oh, I know all about the trains running to anything but a schedule. Why, just the other week, me and Poul waited and waited and waited for Poul's cousin to arrive... wait, did I tell you that story already?"

"Ah, yes you did, Mrs. Thorbjørnson," Vera said and began to inch closer to the stairs. "We're really sorry, but we have to leave now. Bye-bye, Lydia."

Henriette grabbed the cue as well and took off down the stairs. "Bye, Mrs. Thorbjørnson!" she shouted over her shoulder.

"Well... all right. Bye, Vera... Henriette. Stay safe," the chatty neighbor said with a little wave, and for once, she sounded sincere.

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The bicycle storage room looked like it always had, and the men's bicycle Henriette had 'borrowed' earlier was remarkably still where she had put it. After looking left, right and left again, Henriette checked to see if the owner had locked it, but it was ready to use.

Grunting, she pulled the bike away from the wall it was leaning against and folded down the prop stand so she could put her suitcase on the luggage carrier.

In the meantime, Vera put down her own suitcase and studied the green door to Lydia Thorbjørnson's storage room. "And you really slept in there?"

"Sure did. On a chest of drawers," Henriette said, securing the suitcase to the bicycle by tightening two leather straps.

"What was that like?"

"Well..." - Henriette turned around and winked at her lover - "Hard."
"I'll bet," Vera said with a chuckle. She walked a bit further into the storage room to look for a bike she could 'borrow' but couldn't find any that wasn't locked despite having six different bicycles at her disposal. "Locked... locked... locked... also locked... No, I... locked... locked... oh, darn it, there isn't one for me."

"Did you check them all? I remember seeing a black ladies' bicycle the other night."

Vera grunted and moved deeper into the shadows at the far end of the bicycle rack where there were four additional slots next to the six that were occupied. She had a hard time seeing through the darkness so she reached up and pulled the metal chain for the light bulb she knew was hanging down from the ceiling.

When the light came on, she quickly saw that three of the four slots were empty and that the fourth was occupied by the stripped-off frame of an old, worthless bike. "Well, there's no black ladies' bicycle here now..."

"You sure?"

"Fully," Vera said, studying a pair of old posters on the wall. One was the classic 'Keep It To Yourself - Adolf's Listening' and the other explained the rules of proper conduct during an air raid. Reading it briefly, Vera scoffed at the very first rule that said people should form orderly lines and wait for their turn to get into the air raid shelters. "Yeah right... try to do that when high explosives are raining down on your head," she mumbled, briefly revisiting the horrific experiences she'd had in the Shell House.

Shivering, she moved away from the posters and back out into the little corridor. "No bicycles for me, I'm afraid, Henriette..."

"Hush... somebody's coming," Henriette suddenly whispered, staring at the short flight of stairs going down into the basement where a pair of brown, reinforced workboots had appeared.

Vera squeaked and reached up in a hurry to pull the metal chain. Luckily for Vera's and Henriette's blood pressure, the boots belonged to Jens who wheeled his own bicycle down the ramp. Having been sent home from work early, the teenager was in a good mood and whistled accordingly, blissfully unaware that he wasn't alone in the storage room.

The flat cap and boiler suit-wearing youngling put his bicycle against the wall and locked it. Just as he was moving away, he noticed something odd in his peripheral vision - a pair of emerald green eyes looking back at him from the shadows.

Squealing loudly and jumping a foot in the air, he whipped up his hand like he was holding a gun and kept the entire storage room covered with his index finger alone.

"Don't shoot, don't shoot!" Henriette said and put her hands in the air. "We give up, Jens... unconditional surrender is what you'll get from us..."

"Oh, Miss Brandt," the teenager groaned and clapped his gun-hand across his eyes. "You scared me shi- uh, witless. Please don't do that again!"

When Vera moved out of the shadows on the other side of the corridor, the teenager's face lit up in a broad smile. "Miss Holgersen! Oh, I'm so glad to see that you're all right!" he said and hurried forward with his hands ahead of him. "Miss Brandt told me you had been taken by the Germans..."

"Hello, Jens," Vera said and offered the friendly young man a little wave before she shook his hand. "Yes, I was their guest for a couple of hours. Did you hear about the air raid?"
"I did, that's why I'm home early from work... the master knew most of us wanted to see for ourselves so he closed early. Oh, did you hear about the French School?"

Henriette stepped forward and nodded somberly. "We did. Such a tragedy. Listen, Jens... your bicycle..." she said, cocking her head.

"Uh, yeah? What about it?"

"You need your bicycle to get to work, right?"

"Well... depends. If it rains, I usually take the bus or the tram. Uh... what are you getting at, Miss Brandt?" Jens said, furrowing his brow.

Henriette licked her lips and briefly looked back at Vera before she stepped forward with a warm smile on her face. "Well, you see... Miss Holgersen and I sort of need another bicycle. You see, we've been... well, my aunt called and we're going to visit her out in-"

Jens stood up straight and shot Vera a concerned look. "You weren't released, were you? You escaped from the Shell House before the air raid, didn't you?!"

"During," Vera interjected flatly.

"Golly! And now you're fleeing 'cos the HIPOs or the Nazis are on your tail? And you need my bike for that?"

Chuckling, Henriette scratched an eyebrow and went over to the tall teenager to put a hand on his shoulder. "We should have known you were a smart kid, Jens. Yes again."

"Golly!" Jens exclaimed before he leaned forward, attempting to assume an air of secret-agent-ness. "I knew you were involved with the resistance somehow... I just knew it!"

Henriette sobered and moved back over to Vera. "No we're not, Jens. We're not involved in the resistance in any way, shape or form... and I will personally come back and kick your rear end but good if you tell any of your friends that we are. Rumors kill, Jens. Don't you ever forget that."

For a second or two, Jens stared at the two women with a highly confused look on his face, but it was soon replaced by a knowing smirk. "Oh, that won't be necessary, Miss Brandt. I mean, who in their right mind would say that women could be in the resistance? That's a job for men."

"Yes. A job for men." -- "That's right, Jens," Henriette and Vera said as one, nodding just a little too enthusiastically.

"All right. Uh... well, good luck with visiting your... something."

"Aunt," Henriette said.

"Aunt, right. Oh, and I accidentally dropped my key for my bike on the floor. Stupid me," he said and subsequently 'accidentally' dropped the metal key, watching it as it landed with a faint clang on the concrete floor. "Uh... the bicycle was a birthday gift from my mom. D'you think anything will happen to it?" he said and took off his fancy flat cap.

"No, Jens. I promise," Henriette said and gave Vera a little push on the small of her back to make her understand she could go ahead with putting the heavy suitcase on the luggage carrier.
While Vera secured the suitcase by tightening the two leather straps, Henriette shook hands with her smart, young acquaintance. "Thanks a bunch. We'll bring it back one day. Hopefully soon, yeah?"

"Hopefully very soon. Goodbye, Miss Brandt."

"Which reminds me... I thought I had thrown this out, but I hadn't. I found it in my closet when I packed the suitcases," Henriette said and dug into her jacket pocket. When she pulled the hand back out, she held the red, white and royal blue armband she had taken from Jens - the recognized mark of the resistance movement. "But Jens, you have to promise me you won't wear it just for show. If you put on these colors, you have to mean it because our opponents won't care if you're merely playing or not. They'll shoot first and ask questions later. Do you understand what I'm saying?"

"I... I understand, Miss Brandt," Jens said and took the piece of cloth. "We haven't played that game since you took the armband from me. You were right, it was too dangerous."

"Yes. Save it for the liberation. All right?" Henriette said and moved over to her bicycle.

"Yes. Thank you very much, Miss Brandt," Jens said and stuffed the armband into the side pocket of his boiler suit. "Bye, Miss Holgersen. Like I said before, I'm really, really glad to see that you're all right."

"Thanks, Jens. I appreciate it," Vera said as she gave the suitcase a little push to see if it was secure. "Oh, we better get going. Stay safe," she said after she had glanced at the determined look on Henriette's face.

"Thank you. You, too... both of you," Jens said and waved goodbye to the two women.

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By the time Henriette and Vera made it to the part of the city where the block of garages and the French School had been, the fires had mostly been extinguished, but every street in the vicinity had been transformed into either a makeshift field hospital or a morgue.

Two German police officers from a motorcycle unit stood in the middle of Gammel Kongevej and tried to conduct the traffic, but there were so many helpers, ambulances, blocked trams, trucks and gawkers that it had turned to pure chaos, and the men's facial colors proved how difficult it was.

Fenced in by a large group of bicyclists, Henriette came to a stop and put a foot down on the street to keep her balance. She looked at the destruction with a heavy heart, knowing that she'd had a hand in the tragedy.

Even as she was watching, another ambulance left the site with ringing bells and drove back down the boulevard to get to one of the hospitals. A few young boys raced behind it on their bicycles, seemingly not quite understanding the gravity of what had happened.

Henriette let her eyes sweep over the crowd of gawkers, concerned citizens and store owners who had come out to stand in the doors to their shops. It didn't take her long to spot a man in a dark hat and a dark trench coat who seemed to keep a close eye on the spectators rather than on the devastation; then another, and finally another across the street from where she and Vera had to wait for the traffic to clear. "Those bastards... it doesn't matter how many we kill, they just pop up like rats," she mumbled, clenching her fist around the bicycle's handlebars.

"What's that?" Vera said out of the corner of her mouth.
"Gestapo agents. Three of 'em. One by the hardware shop, one by the tobacconist and one across the street..."

Henriette mumbled for Vera's ears only as she casually glanced to her left. "Dammit... where did he... where did the last one go?"

The answer to Henriette's question was answered at once when the missing man in the dark trench coat appeared from between a cluster of bicycles - and even worse, he was walking straight towards them.

Spotting him at once, Vera pressed her lips together until they were merely thin lines in her face. Her eyes grew wide but she forced herself not to panic. However, she couldn't hold back a short groan that made Henriette turn around in the saddle.

"Good afternoon, Ladies," the Gestapo man said in German. "How come you both ride on men's bicycles?" - In his mid-twenties, he had bright blue eyes set well in a youthful face that could have been called charming if it hadn't been for the dark gray uniform he was wearing underneath the trench coat.

The onlookers standing near the little scene dispersed rather urgently, but Henriette screwed a smile on her face and threw her head to make her blonde hair fall down on her shoulder, hoping to look just a bit more Aryan. "Because some dastardly rat stole our bicycles the other month!" she answered truthfully in her best grammar-school German. "Ach, the crime rate these days!"

"Yes, it's terrible," the young Gestapo man said, clearly thinking about the two pretty bicyclists before him rather than the job he was there for - like asking for their papers. "Perhaps we could discuss that over a cup of coffee later on?"

'I don't believe it... I do not believe it! That creep is hitting on me!' Henriette thought, groaning long and hard on the inside. "Oh, I'm so sorry, Herr...?"

"Ohlendorff, Fräulein."

"Herr Ohlendorff, I'm quite sure Hauptmann Walter Burkhard-Krause will object to me drinking coffee with a charming young man such as yourself."

"Hauptmann Burkhard-Krause? Why, is he your father?"

"No, not my father... but the father of my unborn child," she said and put a hand on her stomach for effect.

"Oh, I... oh. All right. Carry on," the Gestapo man said, gesturing Vera and Henriette along the street.

Throughout the conversation, Vera hadn't said a word, and she still didn't trust her voice enough to speak. She looked down at the ground as she got back on her bicycle, not daring to look the officer in the eye.

Henriette smiled at the young man from the Gestapo, but the smile melted from her face as soon as he had turned away from them. Getting onto her bicycle, she had only made it two meters further on when something wet hit her cheek. Reaching up, she found to her disgust that someone had spat on her, no doubt for engaging in a friendly conversation with the enemy, or possibly even for what she had said.

She didn't bother to look behind her because she knew it would only make matters worse. Instead, she reached into her jacket pocket and found a handkerchief that she used to wipe her cheek while she drove through a gap in the crazy traffic.
"Oh, we'll never get there!" Vera cried when they were overtaken by yet another HIPO patrol that raced along the smaller boulevard they had turned onto to get away from the congestion on Gammel Kongevej. Two of the uniformed collaborators were standing on the sideboards brandishing submachine guns to intimidate - or even shoot at - the people they came across.

Sobbing, Vera began to wobble dangerously on her bicycle and she had to pull over and put a leg down on the sidewalk they were riding next to. Breathing in uneven bursts, she pinched the bridge of her nose hard to take her mind off the dangers, but it didn't help. Her chin started to quiver in the tell-tale sign of the floodgates getting ready to crack, but she managed to get it under control by wiping her eyes and her mouth with a handkerchief.

"Precious," Henriette said, returning to Vera and stopping next to her. "Please hold yourself together. We only have four more kilometers to go. Twenty minutes, tops. You can do it, I know you can. Please, we need to go on," she pleaded in a low, insistent voice.

"I can't. I can't do it, love. I'm terrified we'll bump into the HIPO man who arrested me the other night. Him or his partner, a tall, blond guy. If either of them sees me, I'm... I'm... they'll kill us, Henriette. They'll shoot us in the neck... I just know they will!"

"We'll just have to chance it. We can't go back now... come on, we only have four more kilometers to go, baby... please."

When a small group of teenage boys drove past Vera and Henriette, several of them whistled at the two attractive women though it was hard to hear over the rattling of the flexible metal flaps they had attached to the frames to strike the spokes as the wheels turned - a popular way to play they were riding a moped or even a motorcycle.

"See?" Henriette said and put her hand on Vera's shoulder. "They think we should get a move on, too..."

"That's not what their whistles meant, Henriette," Vera croaked before she blew her nose. "And by the way, who in the world is Hauptmann whatshisname Burkhard... someone?"

"Who knows, I just pulled it out of my ear... I thought it had a nice Germanic ring to it."

Shaking her head in disbelief, Vera got back up on her bicycle and started pedaling to get back up to speed.

With a relieved smile, Henriette turned around to follow her partner. At first, she stayed a few meters behind the tall, striking figure simply to see how Vera's body moved as she worked the pedals, but she soon picked up the pace to get alongside her. "Once we get to the corner of Falkoner Alle and Nyelandsvej, we need to hang a left. It's not the most direct way, but it's the safest... I think."

"All right. Let's hope it is."

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A few minutes later, they turned onto Nyelandsvej and saw at once that Henriette had been right - it was even less traveled than Falkoner Alle, and those who were there were mostly younger people from the nearby engineering college.

Vera refused to believe they were home free, but the further they moved away from the frantic activity of the inner-city streets, the calmer she got. In the neighborhood they were riding through, people kept nice little gardens with flagpoles and white picket fences, and the sight of something so traditional, even old-fashioned, gave her the impetus to pick up her pace.
The fact that Denmark was still occupied presented itself in the shape of two German sentries standing guard at the Frederiksberg Hospital, but they kept staring straight ahead when Vera and Henriette drove past them.

Femte Juni Plads and C.F. Richsvej were soon behind them, and when they drove over the railway bridge and towards the next intersection, they could see the two-storey safe house three hundred yards to their right, halfway up a sloping two-lane street.

The traffic lights turned red before they got to it, and even though they were going to hang a right, they preferred to stay at the red light so they wouldn't prompt the other bicyclists at the intersection to take an interest in them.

"Vera," Henriette said quietly while she tugged on her partner's sleeve. When she had Vera's attention, she pointed discreetly up one of the other streets of the large intersection, "there's a German truck depot about four hundred yards up Apollovej, so there's quite often a German presence here... please don't panic if we see soldiers. All right?"

"All right. Thank you."

"Anything for you, love."

"I know," Vera said with relief written all over her face.

When the traffic lights turned green, the two women began to pedal to get back up to speed. Turning right, they were soon on the home stretch to the safe house.

"Almost there..." Vera whispered to herself, but it had been loud enough for Henriette to hear.

"Yes, almost there. Can you make it up the hill, love?"

"You better believe I can! I'll race you there!" Vera said and let out a celebratory cry before she really gave the pedals a workout.

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**Wednesday, March 21st, 1945 - twenty past three, P.M.**

Arriving at the safe house, they went round the back of the house's brick garage and placed their borrowed bicycles up against the back wall next to a door. Although situated at a busy street, the rear of the house was quiet, peaceful and - most importantly - out of sight from the passers-by.

Out of curiosity, Vera peeked through the slightly dusty window in the garage door to see what was hidden inside and saw an old, pre-war Austin Ten that had been chocked up, no doubt to sit out the fuel rationing.

The small inner courtyard was closed in by a tall hedge and a wooden fence on one side and the two-storey building made of red bricks on the other. A concrete staircase that formed the base of the house went down to a basement door that was locked with a solid padlock.

Beyond the wooden fence, a very nice garden was ready to blossom into the colors of the spring, though at present, the trees were still bare and the grass slightly gray after the long, dull winter.

"Hum," Henriette said on her way down the concrete staircase, "let's see what happens when I knock on the door..."

The short answer was nothing at all.
"All right. Now what?" she continued, rubbing her chin.

"Maybe they're not home?"

Henriette grunted and began to look for a key that would fit into the padlock protecting the door. "From what I know, they're retired... I think they're always home," she said, looking under a few ceramic flowerpots and behind a heavy paving slab that was leaning against the inside wall of the staircase. All she found were a few beetles that scurried back down into the shadows. She decided to let them be and put the slab back against the wall.

"Maybe they've gone shopping? Or maybe we caught them in their afternoon nap?" Vera said and began to bite her fingernails. Her heart increased its tempo all over again, and she knew she needed to do something to take her mind off their latest crisis before it got too far out of hand.

Sighing, she went up to the wooden fence and peeked over it. There wasn't anything out of the ordinary there: two apple trees and a couple of flower beds that had been prepared for the spring. A corkscrew willow and a pair of rhododendrons; a metal weather vane and a bird bath shaped like the bottom half of a clam shell.

A slight, metallic clang to her right made her whip her head around and stare with wide open eyes at the source of the sound. "Oh! There's someone working in the garden! Up on a terrace! Hello... hello! Psssst!" she said, waving a hand in the air.

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Five minutes later, the elderly lady of the house unlocked the door to the basement and ushered her two new lodgers into the cellar rooms they were going to stay in until it was safe for them to return to their own apartment - however long that would take. It was hard going for Vera and Henriette to haul their heavy suitcases down the narrow staircase, but they managed.

Going inside, they found themselves in a small anteroom packed with tools and other equipment for the garden. The ceiling was quite low and Vera had to keep her head ducked to fit properly. There was a distinct smell of mothballs, wet dirt and something unidentifiable that stirred an image of an old wine distillery in Henriette's mind.

After closing the door to the concrete staircase, their hostess turned around and offered them a brief smile. She was in her mid- to late sixties with a lined face and white hair, but her steel-gray eyes were as sharp as anyone half her age. Like so many others suffering from the war, her dress and her shoes weren't of the latest fashion and were quite well worn, but it didn't detract from the image that she knew what she was doing.

"Welcome, Ladies. First, allow me to lay down the ground rules. Rule number one, no names. I don't know your real names and I don't want to know. I know you as Hippolyta and the Golden Fleece, and you know me as Athena and that's how it shall remain. Rule number two, if you are careless and are seen through the windows, or visit the garden unaccompanied, or leave the house in broad daylight, I will kick you out on the spot. You understand?"

"Yes, Ma'am," Vera and Henriette said as one.

"All right. Here's what you can do. You're free to go into the laundry to wash your clothes, and into the larder to taste one of our home-made wines made of stinging nettles and rhubarb. You can use the wood-burning stove in the bedroom for your smaller meals and you'll find kindling for it in the boiler room. Just don't burn down the house. You can use the upstairs bathroom for this and that... you can get to it by using an inner staircase I'll show you a little later on... but please don't just barge in without warning. My bedroom is next to the bathroom and I keep a Stengun under my bed. I'm not afraid to use it and I have a perfect aim."

Vera and Henriette looked at each and nodded vigorously.
"I will be down at least twice a day with your larger meals. Oh, and we have an old radio up in the attic that you can use. It's tuned to the BBC, but please only use it sparingly. The Germans are still driving past occasionally with their detector vans and whatnot. Well, I'm sure you're already used to that. I think that's it. I'll let you get settled in now."

"Thank you, Athena," Henriette said and put out her hand.

While the elderly lady shook it, she furrowed her brow and looked at her two female guests like she saw them for the first time. "Oh... something just occurred to me... I'm afraid your bedroom only has one bed. You see, it's quite rare that we get two people at a time. We have another bedroom, but it's terribly cramped and damp. So..."

"Oh, we'll manage, Athena," Vera said and put her hand out as well. "We can just pretend we've gone camping."

The elderly woman's face lit up in a smile as she shook the tall woman's hand. "Why, yes! Yes, that's an excellent idea, Hippolyta. Yes."

"Yes, indeed," Henriette said with a grin that matched that of her hostess.

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The bedroom was larger than Vera and Henriette had predicted or even hoped for - roughly twelve by twenty feet. It even had a window at the end to let in a few strands of daylight though it was covered by a white sheet that had been nailed to the wall all around the window frame so no one could look inside.

The room turned out to have an untreated concrete floor with a few loose rugs here and there to combat the chill that would inevitably seep up from the ground. Beyond that, it had pea-green walls, a pea-green closet that looked like it came from a farm, a dim, dusty light bulb as the only source of light, a few chairs of mixed heritage, a small wood-burning stove in the corner, and an old, old bed that had probably come from the same farm that had provided the closet.

"Well," Henriette said and put her own suitcase on the bed before taking Vera's and putting it next to it, "it's not the Imperial or the d'Angleterre, but it's ours."

Vera nodded absentmindedly as she unbuttoned her coat and took it off. When she opened the closet door to look inside, she was nearly bowled over by the smell of mothballs. Pinching her nostrils, she found a metal hanger for her coat and quickly closed the door again. "I have a good feeling about this house, love. Mmmm. Yes, a good feeling. It's a friendly house... I feel safe here."

"Oh, I'm so glad to hear that," Henriette said and moved over to her partner. With a contented sigh, she wrapped her arms around Vera's waist and pulled the taller woman closer to her. "We've both been to hell and back so I think we're due a little peace and quiet. Tonight, we'll go up into the attic and listen to the BBC to hear if they say anything about the raid... but first, I think we should christen the bed... I mean, take a little nap."

The smile that graced Vera's lips was faint, but it was there. "I think that sounds like a great idea, darling. There's something I need to do even before that, though..."

"Use the bathroom?"

"Give you a kiss," Vera said and took full advantage of the fact that she had to duck her head to fit under the low ceiling - she had a far shorter distance down to Henriette's lips than she usually did, and she managed to take her partner completely by surprise.

The happy moan that followed proved that Henriette wasn't too displeased.
EPILOGUE

Friday, May 4th, 1945 - eight twenty-five P.M.

Creak - creak - creak! Creak - creak - creak!

"Damn... those steps are going to give me a heart attack one day," Henriette mumbled under her breath as she tried to balance a tray with two cups of tea up the noisy and fragile staircase to the attic.

"Psst! Vera!" she whispered strongly when she finally made it to the wooden landing at the top of the stairs, three storeys up from the basement. The door to one of the three rooms was quickly opened and Henriette inched sideways through the door, the only way she could fit with the tray.

Before the radio was put in there, the cramped garret had been used as a box room, something that was still quite evident. It was only seven by ten feet, but it had a two-seater settee, two chairs, a desk from the last decade of the old century, a chandelier that was even older, and finally a sideboard that the radio was balancing on top of crammed into it - the radio's antenna was tied to the cast iron frame of one of the two roof windows which provided surprisingly good reception.

Henriette briefly turned off the light bulb in the ceiling and peeked out through one of the windows. "Well, it's still raining but not as hard as earlier," she said and pulled the black sheet back into place.

"I've noticed," Vera said flatly, pointing at a bucket she had put next to the settee to catch the drops that came down from the inner ceiling at an alarming rate.

"Oh... huh. Well, I could see the clouds moving away so I think it won't carry on for too long. We better turn on the old radio... it needs so long to warm up we have time to play a round of croquet while we wait," Henriette said and flicked a switch on the outdated receiver.

Taking their cups of hot tea, they settled down to wait for the news broadcast to start. When the radio sprung to life, Henriette had to adjust the dial that had wandered for the umpteenth time.

'is London. BBC transmitting to Denmark,' a distinguished male voice said from the radio.

"Oh, that's a good quality today, love," Vera said with a smile. "Keep it there."

"I'm trying!"

'We are transmitting on the nineteen meter band, on two frequencies on the thirty-one meter band, on the forty-one meter band and on the fifteen hundred meter band.'

"And we're receiving you on an old piece of something," Henriette growled as she sat down and took her tea. She had barely touched the cup when the dial wandered again and she had to jump up to readjust it.

'The collapse in Northern Germany is complete. The English have advanced to the Danish border. Kiel and Flensborg have been declared open cities. The amount of captured soldiers is so vast it's impossible to count just yet.'
Rubbing her brow nervously, Vera leaned forward to catch everything from the broadcast. "Oh please, let them come to their senses and end this damn war... please..."

'The Danish Liberation Council has called for discipline in the final hours before the liberation. Admiral Dönitz has had meetings with the German authorities from Norway and Denmark to plan the future course in both countries.'

"Admiral Dumb-nitz. Why can't he understand the Fatherland just doesn't exist anymore? Even ol' Adolf killed himself," Henriette growled, sipping her tea.

'Allied forces from east and west have now been joined over a distance of one hundred and sixty kilometers, and almost all of Germany has been overrun. The Swedish press have reported rumors that Russian paratroopers have landed in the Dyrehaven amusement park north of Copenhagen, and today, rumors flourished that Russian troops have gained a foothold on the island of Falster. These rumors are utterly unfounded."

Henriette shook her head and rolled her eyes. "Now wouldn't that be lovely? From the frying pan and into the f-"

"Oh, hush!" Vera said, waving her hand at her partner.

'Last night saw vicious fighting in the streets of Copenhagen near the German barrack... uh, the German barracks, and there have even been reports of cannon fire. In the Dyrehaven and the square in front of Gentofte Town Hall, German troops have engaged in internecine fighting where...'

The broadcast suddenly came to an abrupt, unnatural end and Henriette jumped up to look at the dial. "It's right on the nose... it's not the radio," she said with a shrug.

The pause went on and on, and Vera started biting her fingernails. "Maybe something's happened in the studio?" she mumbled in a nervous tone.

"What could possibly hap-"

'At this very moment, it's reported that Montgomery has issued a statement that says the German troops in Holland, north-west Germany and Denmark have surrendered. This is-'

"Oh, Sweet Jesus!" Vera howled and stood up so fast her cup slipped out of her grasp and ended up on the floor - it soaked the carpet in no time, but she couldn't care less about that. "Oh, Sweet Jesus, it's over... it's over!"

'London, we'll repeat. Montgomery has at this very moment issued a statement that says the German armies in Holland, north-west Germany and Denmark have surrendered!'

Henriette remained seated, but the look on her face proved that she had a hard time believing it. "The war is over," she whispered after a few seconds.

'This is a special bulletin: Dagmar, Arnold, Brooke, Fatima, Sally, Tristan, Pan, Arthur, Samuel, Elly, Flora, Signe, Edmund and Axel. This has been a special bulletin.'

"Oh!" Vera cried, clutching her head. "Twelve, thirteen, fourteen... fourteen groups! They're activating fourteen resistance groups! Normally it's just one or two!"

"Yeah. That's more or less a general mobilization of the remaining cells all over Denmark. Jesus..." Henriette said, still staring vacantly into space, "there's gonna be a lot of gunfire tonight... the HIPOs won't take this lying down, Vera. They'll fight back. People will die tonight. Many people."
Almost as if on cue, the sounds of scattered gunfire reached the attic of the safe house. Jumping up, Henriette pulled one of the windows open and turned down the radio. With the window open, it was clear to hear someone was firing at something very close by. "The truck depot," she said, nodding somberly.

"You're probably right," Vera said, clenching and unclenching her fists nervously. "Maybe the soldiers haven't been told of the surrender yet...?"

"No, people just have five years worth of anger, hatred and frustration they need to work off. And the Germans are fair game now," Henriette said, closing the window and turning up the volume so they could continue to listen to the BBC.

'have surrendered to Field Marshal Montgomery. The surrender is effective tomorrow morning at eight, British Summertime. At eight, English Summertime... that's the same as in Denmark. The surrender also covers Helgoland and the Friesian Islands, but as previously reported, not Norway. The only Danis- uh, the only German troops that are still fighting are the forces in Czechoslovakia and Norway.'

Vera's legs were wobbling quite badly so she sat down on the chair where she promptly buried her face in her hands. "We can go home now," she said after a little while.

"Not tonight, love. It's far, far too dangerous. Far too many people with scores to settle. The informants and the HIPOs will be hunted down like animals tonight... it'll be a bloodbath."

Cheering from the streets below made Henriette walk back to the window to peek out. All around them, people poured outside carrying the loathed blackout curtains and setting them alight in great, big bonfires in the middle of the street.

Everywhere in the near and far distance, lights from the windows suddenly became visible from houses and apartment buildings, providing solid proof that people were destroying the blackout curtains all through Copenhagen.

A solid wave of cheering rose from the city that seemed to come alive after five years of oppression under the Nazi rule, but the cheering was peppered with muzzle flashes and the sounds of gunfire.

'Please allow me to finish this evening’s broadcast... this greatest evening for you at home that has also been the greatest evening for us out here. Uh, to finish by saying that you are always in our thoughts and that we look forward to meeting you again. This greeting is extended to all Danes, at home or not. To round off, here's the national anthem,' the announcer said and cued a scratchy, slightly warbling version of the Danish national anthem.

While King Christian played on the radio, Vera rose and put out her hand. "Henriette Brandt, now that we're free once again, please allow me to say that... that I love you so much words can't express what I feel for you. And I dearly hope you feel the same for me."

"I do. I very much do," Henriette said and moved over to her partner. Looking up into the moist eyes that seemed bluer than normal, she offered her soulmate a wistful smile. "I'll love you with all of my heart until the end of our days. We've been through so much... it's time for life to make it up to us and give us a few golden years... hell, decades together."

"I'll accept nothing less than a golden lifetime together," Vera said and leaned down to claim Henriette's lips in a warm, reaffirming kiss.

"Oh, that's a promise... one I intend to keep," Henriette whispered before she let herself be kissed silly by her partner.
When they separated, it only lasted for a few seconds - then Henriette grinned and guided Vera down towards her to show the tall woman how girls kissed when they truly had the hots for someone.

'Hullo! Hullo?' their landlady suddenly shouted from out in the stairwell.

"Oh, we better go and see what she wants... we wouldn't want to give her a wrong impression of us," Henriette whispered around a few nibbles of Vera's succulent lips. Reaching out, she opened the door to the stairwell. "Yes?"

'Did you hear the good news?! Denmark has been liberated!' their landlady shouted from downstairs.

"We heard, Athena. We'll be down in two minutes!"

'All right... I'm... I'm putting on my good dress... there'll be no sleeping for me tonight!"

"She's certainly feisty," Vera said with a chuckle after Henriette had pushed the door shut to regain a little privacy in the cramped garret.

"It's the hair. Blondes are generally feisty, y'know," Henriette said and fluffed her golden locks. "Of course... brunettes have their moments, too," she continued, yanking a happily squealing Vera down for yet another unbridled kiss to celebrate the momentous occasion.

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In the clean-up operations to rid the country of collaborators, HIPOs and informants in the days following the liberation, more than ninety people were killed and close to eight hundred were wounded. The surviving HIPOs and other Danish collaborators were all given lengthy prison sentences; the most brutal met their fate at the end of a rope.

The Shell House had another tragic role to play in the days following the liberation when a fanatical SS unit entrenched themselves in the ruins and refused to surrender. After a ferocious battle against several mobilized resistance groups and the Danish Battalion returning from neutral Sweden, they were eliminated late on May 6th.

The senior member of the German National Command, the Reich Plenipotentiary Dr. Werner Best, was given a five-year prison sentence though he only served three. Years after his return to West Germany, he was part of a support network for his old comrades in the SS.

SS-Standartenführer, Oberst der Polizei Friedrich Heidenreich, who had survived the air raid at the Shell House by being out of the building at the time, managed to escape to Germany in the last days of the war but was caught by allied forces and sent back to Denmark. He was sentenced to death but his conviction was changed to a lifetime term of which he only served eight years. He was deported to West Germany to stand trial at a War Crimes Tribunal, but he was declared unfit for a trial on medical grounds and was never formally charged.

SD-Obersturmführer Horst Greinert, secretary Lilly Jensen - Henriette's old friend - and more than one hundred others were reported "missing, presumed dead" after the air raid. Though the bodies and body parts that were recovered in the ruins were too damaged to be identified properly, the missing were later declared legally deceased on March 21st, 1953 in accordance with the laws on missing persons.
Of the RAF personnel participating in the planning and execution of the raid, Air Vice-Marshal Sir Victor Becketts and Group Captain Charles Roderick were both awarded the title of Knight Of The Order Of Dannebrog by the Danish government. Four weeks after the raid on the Shell House, Roderick headed back to Denmark with the same three squadrons - 487 Royal New Zealand, 21 Squadron and 464 Royal Australian - in a low-level attack on the Gestapo headquarters in Odense.

On May 12th, 1945, Field Marshal Montgomery and his British 2nd Army took part in a parade at the Copenhagen City Hall Square that attracted hundreds of thousands of people. Vera and Henriette were there, too, cheering wildly and swinging Dannebrog and the Union Jack with great vigor.

And like they had promised each other, they spent a golden lifetime together.

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THE END

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