

A SPOONFUL of SPYING

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For Debbie

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CHAPTER ONE



Alice walked along the crowded deck with absolutely no eyes on her whatsoever. *Le Mistral* was Paris' most luxurious event boat and she had hoped that she would be able to attend the evening's party in a dazzling frock but, as always, she was in the smart but distinctly anonymous uniform of a waiter. None of the guests at the glittering party would suspect that she was here to do anything other than serve canapés and refill champagne glasses. She passed a woman wearing a maroon velvet gown and offered her one of the bite-size treats from the silver tray on her palm. The woman's companion smiled at the air just above Alice's head and took four.

Beyond them, at the bow of the boat, Alice could see Claude, the older spy she was on the mission with, elegantly kitted out in a perfectly cut evening jacket accented with jet. With his dark hair slicked back into a perfect quiff, and his chiselled features that always drew admiring glances, Claude had, as usual, gathered a crowd of women, each trying to catch his attention. One of them touched him lightly on the elbow and whispered an amusing remark. Her laughter at her own joke floated across the night air to where Alice stood, wondering if she

would draw attention to herself if she disappeared to the galley kitchen for a rest. She had been on her feet and forcing a polite smile for two hours.

Claude was rising. Waving an empty champagne glass at his companions, he strode across the deck towards a waiter carrying a tray packed with sparkling glasses. As he passed Alice, Claude tapped his glass lightly and rhythmically with the side of his diamond signet ring and Alice's eyes widened at the sound. Three short taps and two longer ones. Three in Morse code. It meant three o'clock and it was a signal to Alice to look to her right. Alice flicked her eyes in that direction and spotted her prey.

The man looked ordinary enough, but then they always did. He was watching the patch of deck where a scattering of couples had set up an impromptu dance floor, laughing and falling into one another as *Le Mistral* moved up and down on the sway of the river Seine.

They were nearing a bridge and Alice could see couples leaning over the parapet, watching the boats pass beneath them, the golden sunset reflecting off the water into their faces. Alice saw the man glance upwards. She followed his gaze up to

the middle of the bridge. Between a couple caught in a kiss and a man lifting his small child to wave at the party boats was a woman in a severe grey coat and hat. Her eyes locked with those of the man and Alice saw her nod once.

I was right, she thought. The man was on this boat to pass information and that had been the signal that it was safe to do so.

Alice felt the man brush past her. He was on the move.

Ignoring the hand of one partygoer who had just spied the salmon mousse pastries on her tray, Alice set off after him at a discreet distance, trying to look like she just *happened* to be making her way towards the front of the boat. The man ducked inside to the main party room and Alice followed. The music was louder in here, the band in full swing, and the room was so crowded that Alice found it difficult to follow her quarry. She fixed her eyes firmly on the loose collar stud at the back of his neck and pushed her way through the room, weaving her way round a couple who had broken into a dramatic tango. The man had crossed the room and was about to exit to the opposite side of the boat. Alice was stepping

past a group at the edge of the room when she felt a tug on her elbow.

"Here, let me try one of these," said a girl in a pink evening dress, pursing her lips as she glanced over the pastries on Alice's tray. Alice smiled at her through gritted teeth, trying to keep her eyes on the man as he disappeared through the door and on to the deck.

"They all look so nice," the girl said, pouting. She put a finger to her lips and looked at her companion through thickly mascaraed lashes. "Why don't you choose, Silvie?"

The man had turned left, towards the front of the boat. Alice felt her foot tapping impatiently, but there was no way she could just hand over the entire plate and run. She glanced at the girl, her mind racing. The girl was wearing a chiffon gown in strawberry pink and her shoes were delicate pumps, not the sky-high heels of some of the other women. Alice breathed in and was hit by a scent of almonds in the girl's perfume. Alice smiled and selected a tiny treat from the middle of the tray – a froth of red on a biscuit base.

"I think this would suit Mam'selle," she said. "It is

strawberry almond mousse."

A delighted smile broke across the girl's face.

"Oh, how clever of you," she gushed. She popped the treat into her mouth, grabbed her companion's elbow and dragged her off to dance.

Alice turned on her heel and dashed out on to the deck.

The man was nearing the front of the boat now, where two women stood chatting, away from the noise and bustle of the party. Alice fixed her eyes on the man, watching to see if anything passed between them. Ahead she saw the lights of another party boat heading towards them, its music growing louder as it passed underneath a bridge. Alice glanced up. Like the others, this bridge was packed with couples. It would be so easy for someone to drop something down on to the deck. She had to make sure that she wasn't distracted.

She had nearly reached the small group when she heard the noise of clattering feet behind her and, with a high-pitched squeal, the girl in strawberry chiffon dashed past her. "Silvie, we'll be passing near the Eiffel Tower soon!" she squealed. "Oh, do come and see how beautiful it is. I think I just saw a

shooting star!"

"In the middle of the city? Don't be foolish, Veronique," Silvie muttered.

Just ignore them, thought Alice, focusing on the man. The girl called Veronique grabbed the top rail on the boat's edge and stepped up on to a lower bar, leaning over the side.

The man had paused by the two women, his hand in his pocket. One of the women met his eye and she blinked, with the tiniest nod of her head. Alice edged forwards. The woman took a silver cigarette case from her pocket, clicked it open and offered a cigarette to the man. Alice could see a card tucked inside the case. She *had* to see what was written on it. She moved closer.

The other boat was upon them. The river swelled as it drew past and *Le Mistral* gave a lurch. Alice threw out a hand to steady herself as it pitched sideways, but too late to stop her tray slipping from her hand, the tiny cakes rolling across the deck. Behind her, Veronique gave a sharp scream. Ahead of her, the woman with the cigarette case slipped on the wooden decking and the card flew out and lodged itself in one of the ropes slung along the side

of the boat. It was almost too good an opportunity.

Alice sprang forward, ready to pretend she wanted to return it to the woman, while carefully checking what was written on it. Her fingers had almost closed around the corner of the card when, out of the corner of her eye, she caught a flash of pink flying up, over the boat's rail. She whipped her head round, but she already knew that the girl was in trouble. The force of the lurching boat had thrown her over the side. All thoughts of the card disappeared as Alice flung out an arm and caught at Veronique's waist, hauling her back into the boat. The two of them fell to the floor, the girl crying in shock and fright.

As the girl's companion rushed to help her, Alice saw the man begin to slip away, making the most of the distraction. As the man passed the card he swiped it up and slipped it into his pocket. In a matter of seconds, he would be out of Alice's sight and the mission would have failed. She had to act quickly. She pushed Veronique into the arms of her companion Silvie and hauled herself to her feet. As she did so, she let her hand close on a tiny iced cake that had fallen from her tray, then she placed herself

firmly in the man's way.

"Oh, Monsieur, what a shock," she cried, trying to look as distressed as possible. "This lady almost fell overboard and—"

"Yes, you should get her some water. She's clearly had a fright," he said, trying to step round Alice.

"A terrible, terrible fright," Alice echoed, stepping back in front of him. "Oh…" She put her hand to her forehead and pretended to slump into a faint. The man muttered something under his breath and hurried her to a chair.

"Stay there," he growled. "I'll fetch a steward."

Alice waited till he had left before she uncurled her fist. Laying in the centre of her palm was the white card. A quick dip into his pocket as she "fell" and it had stuck fast to the icing. She was about to slip it into her pocket when she saw Claude making his way along the deck. The older spy went to stand beside her and pretended to look out over the water.

"Did you get it?" he asked in a low voice. Alice nodded and slid the card along the railing towards him. She watched his face carefully. She had not worked with Claude before and he was difficult to

impress. Alice knew he was used to being paired with more senior spies on missions, so when directions had arrived the previous week announcing that he and Alice would be working together he had not bothered to hide his disappointment. But surely he would have to be impressed now. Alice had clutched victory from potential disaster. They had the card.

"What is this supposed to be?" growled Claude.

"What? It's the paper that was being passed to him. It was hidden in a cigarette case."

"Well, that can't be it," hissed Claude. "We were told they would be passing vital information, not a tatty slip of paper."

"Nothing was passed," insisted Alice.

"Weren't you watching the bridges? Think!"

Alice's blood ran cold. What if, in the moment when she glanced at the girl in the pink dress, something had been dropped from the bridge? What was it the girl had said? She thought she saw a shooting star. But it was only twilight – not dark enough to see shooting stars. Something else must have shot past, glinting in the evening sun.

"Someone dropped something metallic. Just before the man met the two women, something fell

from the sky," Alice said, snatching back the slip of card and jamming it into her pocket.

"A film canister," nodded Claude. "Let's go."

They ran through the boat, almost colliding with partygoers. The boat was pulling into dock at a jetty on the side of the river and people were preparing, reluctantly, to go onshore. Claude pushed aside a waiter carrying a champagne bucket and Alice almost slipped as the ice sloshed across the floor.

"There!" cried Alice. The man was waiting by the gangway, chatting to the crew as they prepared to swing it out on to the bank. Claude careered down the deck towards him and the two of them locked eyes. For a second it looked like the man would turn and run, but instead he launched himself over the side of the boat, swung himself out and, with an expert somersault, landed safely on the riverbank.

Claude and Alice dashed to the edge of the boat and watched in dismay as the man turned and made his way towards a waiting taxi. Behind them, the crew began to roll the gangway out to the bank.

"Come on," muttered Claude. He leapt on to the end of the gangway, ignoring the cries of the crew, and began to run down it. Alice followed, but

with nothing to anchor it at each end, the gangway began to sway alarmingly. Claude stumbled forwards, grabbing at the rails, Alice tripped and fell sideways towards the river. As she hit the edge of the gangway it lurched, toppling both of them into the river, to peals of laughter from the party guests. Alice spluttered her way toward the bank and hauled herself out. As she peeled river weeds from her hair she saw the man smirking at them and slipping into the back seat of his cab.



"It was a disaster," she said as they walked back along the river. "I fluffed it. What a waste of an evening." She jammed her hands deep into the pockets of her coat and kicked a loose stone into the river. They had spent hours planning this mission, and because Alice had allowed herself to be distracted by that foolish girl, it had almost been ruined.

Alice became aware of Claude watching her closely and she looked away across the river. She didn't need to meet Claude's eye to know that he was utterly disappointed and it was all Alice's fault. Alice hated getting things wrong in front of the older agents. She thought back to her first mission,

on board France's luxurious Sapphire Express. That had so nearly turned to utter tragedy because of the mistakes she had made. Alice felt her cheeks colour up at the thought of it, even though it had been a huge success. She had been welcomed into the network of spies working for France against her enemies, but even so she still felt like she was always running to catch up. After her adventure on the Sapphire Express she had been determined to track down her Uncle Robert, but time had passed by with no word of him and she had been assigned to other missions. Then there were the other spies, who were all so much more glamorous and grown-up than her. She wished that her friend from the train, Penelope, was here to talk to, but Penelope was busy at finishing school in Nice and her letters were full of chat about lessons and parties, a far cry from her days of trying to uncover jewel thieves with Alice.

"It's annoying," said Claude. "But I overreacted; it was hardly your fault. You must have been distracted by that girl's accident."

"I shouldn't have let myself though," she said. "We failed and it was all my fault, letting that girl

get in the way."

"Falling overboard is not getting in the way," Claude said sternly.

Alice shrugged.

"Alice Éclair, look at me!"

Alice was so surprised to hear Claude use her full name that she almost walked into a lamppost.

"Saving lives is never a disaster," Claude continued, his eyes boring into Alice's. "It's the job. If someone gets in the way because they need us, then we save them. If they distract us because they need us, then we save them. If saving them means we lose a codeword or a lead or even a set of plans, we still save them. Don't *ever* let me hear you be so careless about a human life again."

"But the mission…"

"So we didn't get the microfilm, Alice. It's only one piece of the puzzle. We'll find others. And if you had let that girl drown to save a slip of film… Well, I would be very disappointed in you."