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MISSION TO CAIRO
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Chapter one

September 1941

The woman's teeth are pearly white.

I stare up at the smiling face on the poster high above me. In another time, before the war, the model would be advertising toothpaste or face cream, but not in the autumn of 1941. Today, she is inviting ordinary women to join her organisation as she poses in front of a fighter plane.

"COME AND JOIN THE WAAF" are the words printed in bold letters above her head.

Papa and I have made the journey from London to the WAAF training school in Harrogate, Yorkshire. After driving for several hours, he parks his car outside

the grounds and I am glad to stretch my legs. The poster is the first thing I notice.

"WAAF stands for Women's Auxiliary Air Force. It's the supporting organisation for the Royal Air Force where our pilots are fighting Adolf Hitler's Nazis in the sky," Papa explains, when he sees me looking at it.

Papa and I are here to meet an old friend of his. One who can share with him the details of his next mission. My papa, Captain Camberwell, is one of Prime Minister Winston Churchill's Special Operations Executive spies. SOE spies are sent around the world to subvert and sabotage the Nazis' plans.

We walk through the gates just as a line of seven women jog past. I turn to stare after them. Seeing their short-sleeved T-shirts makes me shiver and I pull my scarf tightly around my neck. This year the English weather changed as soon as August ended. I found the drop in temperature a little difficult to deal with. I have only ever known the hot sun of India where I was raised. Granted it was a little cool when Papa brought me to England in the spring, but then I was locked away with my governess and a warm fire in Camberwell House, our family home, so I did not really notice it.

"Must they do physical training here too?" I ask. "On top of learning how to use Morse code?"

“Physical exercise is part of the training …” Papa pauses as he gives way to four women dressed in the navy-blue WAAF uniform, who walk briskly past, clutching folders in their arms.

“Look at how these women are working together,” he says. “Sharing friendship and common interests. Wouldn’t you like to be with girls your own age?”

I tense. Papa has been trying to persuade me to attend boarding school, so that he can go off on his next mission.

“I’m not going to boarding school.” I state calmly.

Papa pushes a hand through his hair. “Be reasonable, Rosie.”

“I’m not going to a school filled with Miss Maryland types.”

I am referring to my former governess, who Papa had to dismiss because she refused to listen when I told her she was teaching me things I already knew.

“We’ll talk about it later,” Papa says, making it clear that the subject isn’t closed. “Now, how do we find Vera in this place?”

Vera Atkins is part of the team that runs the Special Operations Executive. The Harrogate centre is a WAAF training school, not an SOE base, but Vera is here on another matter and she urgently needs to meet with Papa.

I was the one who answered the phone call from Vera, asking him to come and, when I heard, I begged Papa to allow me to accompany him. I had been cooped up in Camberwell House ever since we returned from a secret mission to Nazi-occupied France a few weeks ago. Well, apart from the few days in London where we met the prime minister at 10 Downing Street.

When Papa agreed, I was really excited about our trip. Until I realised he was going to use the time in the car to convince me to go to boarding school.

"Ah, Captain!" a voice calls from behind.

Papa and I turn to see a woman hurrying towards us.

"Vera!" Papa steps forward to kiss his friend's cheek. "It's good to see you."

"Thank you so much for coming," Vera says, sounding a little flustered. "I realise it's rather out of your way, but I had to come here to confirm something and now we really need to get on top of it all."

Papa takes Vera's hand in his own and squeezes it. "We will, we will," he reassures her.

Vera takes a deep breath, visibly calming herself and then turns to me. "And how's our young spy?"

I can't help blushing. My time spent with my father in Nazi-occupied France had earned me the title of 'Churchill's Spy'. I am very proud of this, and love that

Vera remembers me. Vera is such an important figure in the world of secret agents.

Clearing my throat, I stand an inch taller. "I am very well, thank you."

"How's Jean?"

Vera is asking after the French boy who came back with us from France. He was part of the Maquis, the French Resistance, even though he is only eleven, like me. His name was betrayed to the Nazis, and they would have sent him to a prison camp if he was ever caught. Prime Minister Churchill himself told Jean that he could remain in England for as long as he wanted.

"Jean is living with a family in Yorkshire," Papa says. "It will give him some stability. He is one of the evacuee children they have taken in."

"I am glad," Vera says. "To think what the poor boy has been through, losing his parents so tragically."

"He is safe now," Papa says. "Orphaned children shouldn't be used in wars as if they have no worth."

Vera nods her head in agreement. "It's hard when there's no close family to look out for them."

I glance at Papa. Before he can move on to suggesting that boarding school would be a safe place for me, I decide to steer the conversation in another direction.

"Have you heard from Leon?"

Leon is Papa's good friend in the Maquis. He too had been compromised and had to flee France with us. The last time I saw him was when we said goodbye outside Downing Street after meeting the prime minister.

"He's down in Hampshire at the SOE training centre, doing a great job teaching new agents about French ways," Vera says. "We can't have people exposing themselves as being English by making silly mistakes."

I think back to the poor English pilot whose plane crashed in the French countryside. He managed to survive the crash and even took some clothes off a washing line, so he could dress as a Frenchman to blend in. The slip-up he made was cycling on the wrong side of the road. That immediately gave away where he was from.

The other RAF pilot to survive our mission was Yasin. He also fled to England with us, after hiding in a barn for weeks. Now he is back in the air force, flying fighter planes.

"Goodness, we've been standing here for ages," Vera says, turning towards the building. "I've asked to use one of the offices. We'll have some privacy there."

We walk briskly inside, turn left into a long corridor and down some stairs to the basement. Vera opens the door to a small, windowless room and waves us in.

Three wooden chairs are the only furniture in there, and the whitewashed walls are bare except for a WAAF poster which takes centre stage.

I sit down on the chair opposite Vera. Papa prefers to stroll over to the wall to lean back against it. He places his hands in his trouser pockets and begins the secret conversation.

"So, who is it you want me to meet?"