Book: The Rose Code

Endorsements

Praise for The Rose Code

“The hidden history of Bletchley Park has been waiting for a master storyteller like Kate Quinn to bring it to life. The Rose Code effortlessly evokes the frantic, nervy, exuberant world of the Enigma codebreakers through the eyes of three extraordinary women who work in tireless secrecy to defeat the Nazis. Quinn’s meticulous research and impeccable characterization shine through this gripping and beautifully executed novel.”

—Beatriz Williams, New York Times bestselling author of Her Last Flight

“A knockout of a story, written by the reigning queen of historical fiction. Quinn’s trio of heroines practically leap off the page in this stunning novel, which melds spy-hunting with love stories that will stir your soul. A book for the ages.”

—Fiona Davis, New York Times bestselling author of The Lions of Fifth Avenue

“The Rose Code is everything you love about an unputdownable novel and more. In her signature fashion, Kate Quinn expertly and vividly breaks wide open the secret world of Bletchley Park’s remarkable codebreakers. An unforgettable war story to be sure, but also a tale of friendship, fortitude, and forgiveness. Utterly satisfying.”

—Susan Meissner, bestselling author of The Nature of Fragile Things

“The Rose Code is a firecracker of a novel! By illuminating the top-secret work done by codebreakers at England’s Bletchley Park, Kate Quinn has created a fresh take on World War II and created three unforgettable heroines who use their intelligence, grit, and tenacity to help save the world from the Nazis. Clear out your calendar, because once you start reading this one, you won’t put it down.”

—Elise Hooper, author of Fast Girls

“Kate Quinn does it again! This rollicking tale of espionage and female solidarity is a tour de force that will make you laugh and cry at the same time. The Rose Code is pure genius and Quinn’s best . . . so far.”

—Stephanie Dray, New York Times bestselling author of The Women of Chateau Lafayette

Praise for The Huntress

New York Times and USA Today Bestseller

“A complexly structured saga . . . intrigue worthy of a Hitchcock movie. . . . To paraphrase one of the characters, Ms. Quinn’s book is ‘dynamite in print.’”

—Wall Street Journal

“An utter triumph!”

—Pam Jenoff, New York Times bestselling author of The Orphan’s Tale

“A powerful novel about unusual women facing sometimes insurmountable odds with grace, grit, love and tenacity.”

—Kristin Hannah, Washington Post

“An impressive historical novel sure to harness WWII-fiction fans’ attention.”

—Booklist (starred review)

“A masterpiece of historical fiction.”

—Jennifer Robson, bestselling author of The Gown

Praise for The Alice Network

New York Times and USA Today Bestseller

“Amazing historical fiction . . . a must-read!”

—Historical Novel Society (Editors’ Choice)

“Kate Quinn announces herself as one of the best artists of the genre. . . . Fans of historical fiction, spy fiction and thrilling drama will love every moment.”

—BookPage

“Both funny and heartbreaking, this epic journey of two courageous women is an unforgettable tale of little-known wartime glory and sacrifice. Quinn knocks it out of the park with this spectacular book!”

—Stephanie Dray, New York Times bestselling author of America’s First Daughter

“This fast-paced story offers courageous heroines, villains you love to hate, and dramatic life-or-death stakes. A compelling blend of historical fiction, mystery, and women’s fiction, Quinn’s complex story and engaging characters have something to offer just about everyone.”

—Library Journal (starred review)

Half Title Page

The Rose Code

Card Page

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Title Page

The Rose Code

A Novel

Kate Quinn

William Morrow

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Dedication

To the veterans of Bletchley Park—you changed the world

Half Title Page

The Rose Code

Part 1

Eight Years Ago

December 1939

Chapter 1

Chapter 1

“‘I wish I was a woman of about thirty-six, dressed in black satin with a string of pearls,’” Mab Churt read aloud. “That’s the first sensible thing you’ve said, you silly twit.”

“What are you reading?” her mother asked, flipping through an old magazine.

“Rebecca, Daphne du Maurier.” Mab turned a page. She was taking a break from her dog-eared list of “100 Classic Literary Works for the Well-Read Lady”—not that Mab was a lady, or particularly well-read, but she intended to be both. After plowing through number 56, The Return of the Native (ugh, Thomas Hardy), Mab figured she’d earned a dip into something enjoyable like Rebecca. “The heroine’s a drip and the hero’s one of those broody men who bullies you and it’s supposed to be appealing. But I can’t put it down, somehow.” Maybe just the fact that when Mab envisioned herself at thirty-six, she was definitely wearing black satin and pearls. There was also a Labrador lying at her feet, in this dream, and a room lined with books she actually owned, rather than dog-eared copies from the library. Lucy was in this dream too, rosy in a plum-colored gym slip, the kind girls wore when they went to some expensive day school and rode ponies.

Mab looked up from Rebecca to watch her little sister canter her fingers over imaginary fences: Lucy, nearly four years old and too skinny for Mab’s liking, dressed in a grubby jumper and skirt, forever pulling off her socks. “Lucy, stop that.” Tugging the sock back up over Lucy’s foot. “It’s too cold to be running around barefoot like a Dickens orphan.” Mab had done Dickens last year, numbers 26 through 33, plowing through chapters on her tea breaks. Blech, Martin Chuzzlewit.

“Ponies don’t wear socks,” Lucy said severely. She was mad for horses; every Sunday Mab took her to Hyde Park to watch the riders. Oh, Lucy’s eyes when she saw those burnished little girls trotting past in their jodhpurs and boots. Mab yearned to see Lucy perched on a well-groomed Shetland.

“Ponies don’t wear socks, but little girls do,” she said. “Or they catch cold.”

“You played barefoot all your life, and you never caught cold.” Mab’s mother shook her head. She’d given Mab her height, an inch shy of six feet, but Mab stretched into her height with lifted chin and squared shoulders, and Mrs. Churt always slouched. The cigarette between her lips waggled as she murmured aloud from an old issue of the Bystander. “‘Two 1939 debs, Osla Kendall and the Honorable Guinevere Brodrick, had Ian Farquhar to chat to them between races.’ Look at that mink on the Kendall girl . . .”

Mab cast an eye over the page. Her mother found it all enthralling—which daughter of Lord X curtsied to the queen, which sister of Lady Y appeared at Ascot in violet taffeta—but Mab studied the society pages like an instruction manual: what ensembles could be copied on a shopgirl budget? “I wonder if there’ll be a Season next year, what with the war.”

“Most debs’ll be joining the Wrens, I reckon. It’s the Land Army or the ATS for folks like us, but posh girls all go for the Women’s Royal Naval Service. They say they got the uniform designed by Molyneux, him who dresses Greta Garbo and the Duchess of Kent . . .”

Mab frowned. There were uniforms everywhere these days—so far, the only sign there even was a war. She’d been standing in this same East London flat, smoking tensely alongside her mother as they listened to the radio announcement from Downing Street, feeling chilly and strange as Chamberlain’s weary voice intoned, “This country is at war with Germany.” But since then, there’d hardly been a peep from the Huns.

Her mother was reading aloud again. “‘The Honorable Deborah Mitford on a paddock seat with Lord Andrew Cavendish.’ Look at that lace, Mabel . . .”

“It’s Mab, Mum.” If she was stuck with Churt, she wasn’t ruddy well putting up with Mabel. Plowing her way through Romeo and Juliet (number 23 on Mab’s list), she had run across Mercutio’s “I see Queen Mab hath been with you!” and plucked it out on the spot. “Queen Mab.” That sounded like a girl who wore pearls, bought her little sister a pony, and married a gentleman.

Not that Mab had any fantasies about dukes in disguise or millionaires with Mediterranean yachts—life wasn’t a novel like Rebecca. No mysterious moneyed hero was going to swoop a Shoreditch girl off her feet, no matter how well-read. But a gentleman, some nice, comfortable man with a decent education and a good profession—yes, a husband like that was within reach. He was out there. Mab just had to meet him.

“Mab!” Her mother shook her head, amused. “Who d’you think you are, then?”

“Someone who can do better than Mabel.”

“You and your better. What’s good enough for the rest of us isn’t good enough for you?”

No, Mab thought, knowing better than to say so, because she’d come to learn that people didn’t like your wanting more than you had. She’d grown up fifth of six children all crammed together in this cramped flat that smelled of fried onions and regret, a toilet that had to be shared with two other families—she’d be damned if she’d ever be ashamed of it, but she’d be doubly damned if it was enough. Was it such a terrible thing, wanting to do more than work in a factory until you got married? Wanting more in a husband than one of the local factory workers, who would probably drink too much and eventually run out altogether like Mab’s dad? Mab never tried to tell her family they could make more of themselves; it was fine with her if they were happy with what they had, so why couldn’t they leave her alone?

“You think you’re too good to work?” Mum had demanded when Mab protested leaving school at fourteen. “All these kids around and your father gone—”

“I’m not too good to work,” Mab had flashed back. “But I’m going to work for something.” Even at fourteen, laboring at the grocer’s and dodging the clerks who pinched her bum, she’d been looking ahead. She got a clerk’s post and studied how the better customers talked and dressed. She learned how to carry herself, how to look people in the eye. After a year’s scrutiny of the girls who worked the counters at Selfridges, she walked through those double doors on Oxford Street in a cheap suit and good shoes that had taken half a year’s wages, and landed herself a job selling powder compacts and scent. “Aren’t you lucky,” Mum had said, as if it hadn’t taken any work at all.

And Mab wasn’t done yet, not by a long shot. She’d just finished a scrimped-for secretarial course, and by the time she turned twenty-two early next year she intended to be sitting behind some shiny desk, taking dictation and surrounded by people who said “Good morning, Miss Churt” instead of “Oi, Mabel!”

“What are you going to do with all that planning?” her mother asked. “Get yourself a fancy boyfriend to pick up the tab for a few dinners?”

“I’ve no interest in fancy boyfriends.” As far as Mab was concerned, love stories were for novels. Love wasn’t the point—even marriage wasn’t the point, not really. A good husband might have been the fastest way up the ladder toward safety and prosperity, but it wasn’t the only way. Better to live an old maid with a shiny desk and a salary in the bank, proudly achieved through the sweat of her own efforts, than end up disappointed and old before her time thanks to long factory hours and too much childbirth.

Anything was better than that.

Mab glanced at the clock. Time for work. “Give me a kiss, Luce. How’s that finger?” Mab examined the upheld knuckle where Lucy had run a splinter yesterday. “Good as new. Goodness, you’re grubby . . .” Wiping Lucy’s cheeks with a fresh handkerchief.

“A little dirt never hurt anyone,” Mrs. Churt said.

“I’ll draw you a bath when I get home.” Mab kissed Lucy, fighting irritation at her mother. She’s tired, that’s all. Mab still winced to remember how furious Mum had been, enduring such a late addition to a family that already boasted five children. “I’m too old to be chasing after babies,” Mum had sighed, watching Lucy crawl about the floor like a crab. Still, there hadn’t exactly been anything they could do about it except manage.

For a little while longer, anyway, Mab thought. If she landed a good husband she’d wheedle him into helping her sister, so Lucy would never have to leave school for a job at fourteen. If he’d give her that, Mab would never ask for anything else.

Cold slapped her cheeks as she hurried out of the flat into the street. Five days until Christmas, but no snow yet. Two girls in Auxiliary Territorial Service uniforms hurried past, and Mab wondered where she’d sign up if service became compulsory . . .

“Fancy a walk, darling?” A fellow in RAF uniform fell into step beside her. “I’m on leave, show a fellow a good time.”

Mab shot him the glance she’d perfected at fourteen, a ferocious stare leveled from below very straight, very black brows, then sped her pace. You could join the WAAF, she thought, reminded by the fellow’s uniform that the Royal Air Force had a Women’s Auxiliary branch. Better than being a Land Girl, stuck shoveling cow shit in Yorkshire.

“Come on, that’s no way to treat a man going to war. Let's have a kiss . . .”

He sneaked an arm around her waist, squeezing. Mab smelled beer, hair cream, and an ugly flicker of memory pushed upward. She shoved it down, fast, and her voice came out more of a snarl than she intended. “Bugger off—” And she kicked the pilot in the shins with swift, hard efficiency. He yelped, staggering on the icy cobbles. Mab pried his hand off her hip and headed for the Tube, ignoring the things he called after her, shaking off the shiver of memory. Silver linings—the streets might have been full of handsy soldiers, but plenty of soldiers wanted to take a girl to the altar, not just to bed. If there was anything war brought in its wake, it was hasty weddings. Mab had already seen it in Shoreditch: brides saying their vows without even waiting for a secondhand wedding dress, anything to get that ring on their finger before their fiancés went off to fight. And well-read gentlemen rushed off to war every bit as fast as Shoreditch men. Mab certainly wasn’t going to call the war a good thing—she’d read her Wilfred Owen and Francis Gray, even if war poetry had been deemed too indelicate for “100 Classic Literary Works for the Well-Read Lady.” But she’d have had to be an idiot not to realize that war was going to change her world beyond rationing.

Maybe she wouldn’t need to get a secretarial post after all. Could there be war work somewhere in London for a girl who’d come tops in typing and shorthand, some post where Mab could do her part for king and country, meet a nice man or two, and look after her family?

A shop door banged open, releasing brief strains of “The Holly and the Ivy” from a radio inside. By Christmas of 1940, Mab thought, things might be entirely different. This year, things had to change.

War meant change.

Chapter 2

Chapter 2

I need a job. It had been Osla’s first thought, returning to England at the end of ’39.

“Darling, aren’t you supposed to be in Montreal?” her friend Sally Norton had exclaimed. Osla and the Honorable Sarah Norton shared a godfather and had been presented at court a Season apart; Sally had been the first person Osla telephoned when she stepped back on English soil. “I thought your mother shipped you off to the cousins when war broke out.”

“Sal, do you think anything was going to keep me from finagling my way home?” It had taken Osla six weeks, seething and furious, to scheme an escape after her mother had shipped her to Montreal. Some shameless flirtation with a few influential men for travel permits, some creative fibbing to her Canadian cousins, a tiny bit of fraud—that air ticket from Montreal to Lisbon had been much better off with Osla than its original owner—and a boat ride out of Portugal later, voilà. “Goodbye, Canada!” Osla sang, tossing her traveling case into the taxi. Osla might have been born in Montreal, but she didn’t remember anything before arriving in England at the age of four, trailing behind a recently divorced mother along with the trunks and the scandal. Canada was beautiful, but England was home. Better to be bombed at home among friends than be safe and corroding in exile.

“I need a job,” Osla told Sally. “Well, first I need a hairdresser because that horrid boat from Lisbon gave me lice, and I look like a dog’s dinner. Then I need a job. Mamma’s in such a pelter she’s cut off my allowance, for which I don’t blame her. Besides, we’ve got to poker up, as the Yanks might say, and do our bit for the war.” The old sceptred isle in her hour of need, and so forth. You couldn’t be booted out of as many boarding schools as Osla Kendall without picking up a good bit of Shakespeare.

“The Wrens—”

“Don’t talk slush, Sal, everyone expects girls like us to join the WRNS.” Osla had been called a silly deb enough times for it to sting—a burbling belle, a champagne Shirley, a mindless Mayfair muffin. Well, this Mayfair muffin was going to show everyone a society girl could get her hands dirty. “Let’s join the Land Army. Or make airplanes, how about that?”

“Do you know anything about making airplanes?” Sally had laughed, echoing the dubious labor superintendent at the Hawker Siddeley factory in Colnbrook, where they applied several days later.

“I know how to take the rotor arm off an automobile to save it being stolen by Huns if we get invaded,” Osla retorted pertly. And in no time at all she was clapped into a boiler suit, drilling eight hours a day in the factory training room beside fifteen other girls. Maybe it was dull work but she was earning a wage, living independently for the first time in her life.

“I thought we’d be working on Spitfires and flirting with pilots,” Sally complained across the workbench on New Year’s Eve. “Not just drilling, drilling, drilling.”

“No grousing,” the instructor warned, overhearing. “There’s a war on, you know!”

Everyone was saying that now, Osla had observed. Milk run out? There’s a war on! Ladder in your stockings? There’s a war on!

“Don’t tell me you don’t despise this stuff,” Sally muttered, banging her Dural sheet, and Osla eyed her own with loathing. Dural made the outer skins for the Hurricanes flown by RAF squadrons (if RAF squadrons actually flew any missions in this war where nothing yet was happening), and Osla had spent the last two months learning to drill it, file it, and pot-rivet it. The metal fought and spat and gave off shavings that clogged her hair and nose so thickly her bathwater turned gray. She hadn’t known it was possible to cherish a hatred this profound for a metal alloy, but there you were.

“You’d better save some swoony RAF pilot’s life when you’re finally slapped onto the side of a Hurricane,” she told the sheet, leveling her drill at it like a gunslinger in a cowboy film.

“Thank God we got tonight off for New Year’s,” Sally said when the clock finally ticked over to six in the evening and everyone streamed for the doors. “What dress did you bring?”

“The green satin. I can slither into it at my mother’s suite at Claridge’s.”

“She’s forgiven you for bunking out of Montreal?”

“More or less. She’s chuffed about everything these days because she’s got a new beau.” Osla just hoped he wouldn’t be stepfather number four.

“Speaking of admirers, there’s a gorgeous fellow I promised to introduce you to.” Sally threw Osla an arch look. “He’s the goods.”

“He’d better be dark. Blond men simply aren’t to be trusted.”

They pelted laughing through the factory gate toward the road. With only twenty-four hours off every eighth day, there was no point wasting a minute of those precious hours heading back to their digs; they hitched a ride straight into London in an ancient Alvis, its headlights fitted with slotted masks to meet blackout regulations, driven by a pair of lieutenants who were already absolutely kippered. They were all singing “Anything Goes” by the time the Alvis pulled up at Claridge’s, and as Sally lingered to flirt, Osla skipped up the front steps toward the hall porter who for years had been a sort of butler, uncle, and social secretary combined. “Hello, Mr. Gibbs.”

“Good evening, Miss Kendall. You’re in town with Miss Norton? Lord Hartington was asking after her.”

Osla lowered her voice. “Sally’s fixing me up with someone. Did she give you a hint?”

“She did indeed. He’s inside—Main Lounge, Royal Navy cadet uniform.” Mr. Gibbs looked judicious. “Shall I tell him you’ll be down in an hour, once you’ve changed?”

“If he doesn’t love me in a boiler suit, he’s not worth dressing up for in the first place.” Sally came dashing up and started interrogating Gibbs about Billy Hartington, and Osla sauntered inside. She rather enjoyed the stuffy looks from men in their evening tails and women in their satin gowns as she breezed over the art deco floors in a grubby boiler suit. Look at me! she wanted to shout. I’ve just finished an eight-hour day in an airplane factory and now I’m going to do the conga round the Café de Paris until dawn. Look at me, Osla Kendall, eighteen years old and finally useful.

She spotted him at the bar in his cadet uniform, turned away so she couldn’t see his face. “You wouldn’t happen to be my date, would you?” Osla asked that set of rather splendid shoulders. “Mr. Gibbs says you are, and anybody who’s ever been to Claridge’s knows Mr. Gibbs is never wrong.”

He turned, and Osla’s first thought was, Sally, you rat, you might have warned me! Actually, that was her second thought. Osla’s first thought was that even though she’d never met him, she knew exactly who he was. She’d seen his name in the Tatler and the Bystander; she knew who his family was and the degree to which he was related to the king. She knew he was exactly her age, was a cadet at Dartmouth, and had returned from Athens at the king’s request when war broke out.

“You must be Osla Kendall,” said Prince Philip of Greece.

“Must I?” She repressed the urge to pat at her hair. If she’d known she had a date with a prince, she would have taken a moment to brush the Dural shavings out of her curls.

“Mr. Gibbs said you’d be along right about now, and Mr. Gibbs is never wrong.” The prince leaned against the bar, tanned golden, hair glinting like a coin, eyes very blue and direct. He took in her dirty boiler suit and gave a slow grin. Oh, my, Osla thought. That’s a smile. “Absolutely smashing getup,” he said. “Is that what all the girls are wearing this season?”

“It’s what Osla Kendall is wearing this season.” She struck a magazine pose, refusing to regret the green satin gown in her bag. “I will not be confined within the weak lists of a country’s fashions—”

“Henry V,” he said promptly.

“Oooh, you know your Shakespeare.”

“They crammed a bit into me at Gordonstoun.” He nodded at the bartender, and a wide-brimmed coupe frothing with champagne materialized at Osla’s elbow. “In between all the hiking and sailing.”

“Of course you sail—”

“Why ‘of course’?”

“You look like a Viking; you must have put some time in on an oar or two. Have you got a longship parked round the corner?”

“My uncle Dickie’s Vauxhall. Sorry to disappoint.”

“I see you two are getting along,” Sally laughed, slipping up beside them. “Os, our godfather”—Lord Mountbatten—“is Phil’s uncle, so that’s the connection. Uncle Dickie said Phil didn’t know anyone in London, and did I know a nice girl who could squire him around—”

“A nice girl,” Osla groaned, taking a slug of champagne. “There’s nothing more deadly than being called nice.”

“I don’t think you’re nice,” the prince said.

“Don’t you say the sweetest things?” Tipping her head back. “What am I, then?”

“The prettiest thing I’ve ever seen in a boiler suit.”

“You should see me pot-rivet a seam.”

“Anytime, princess.”

“Are we going dancing or not?” Sally complained. “Come upstairs and change, Os!”

Prince Philip looked speculative. “If I made you a dare—”

“Careful,” Osla warned. “I don’t back down from dares.”

“She’s famous for it,” Sally agreed. “At Miss Fenton’s, the upper-form girls dared her to put itching powder in the headmistress’s knickers.”

Philip looked down at Osla from his full six feet, grinning again. “Did you do it?”

“Of course. Then I stole her suspender belt, climbed the chapel roof, and hung it from the cross. She kicked up quite a shindy over that. What’s your dare?”

“Come out dancing as you are,” the prince challenged. “Don’t change into whatever satin thing you’ve got in that bag.”

“You’re on.” Osla tossed down the rest of her champagne, and they piled laughing out of the Main Lounge. Mr. Gibbs gave Osla a wink as he opened the doors. She took one gulp of the icy, starry night outside—you could see stars all over London now, with the blackout—and looked over her shoulder at Prince Philip, who had paused to tilt his head up, too. She felt the champagne fizzing in her blood and reached into her pack. “Am I allowed to wear these?” She pulled out her dancing shoes: green satin sandals with glitters of diamanté. “A princess can’t conga without her glass slippers.”

“I’ll allow it.” Prince Philip tugged the sandals away, then picked up her hand and placed it on his shoulder. “Steady . . .” And he knelt down right there on the front steps of Claridge’s to undo Osla’s boots, waiting for her to step out of them, then peeling off her wool socks. He slid her satin sandals on, tanned fingers dark against her white ankles in the faint moonlight. He looked up then, eyes shadowed.

“Oh, seriously.” Osla grinned down at him. “How many girls have you tried this on, sailor?”

He was laughing too, unable to hold his intent expression. He laughed so hard he nearly toppled over, forehead coming for a moment against Osla’s knee, and she touched his bright hair. His fingers were still braceleted around her ankle, warm in the cold night. She saw how passersby were staring at the girl in the boiler suit on the front steps of Mayfair’s best hotel, the man in naval uniform on one knee before her, and gave Philip’s shoulder a playful smack. “Enough swooning.”

He rose. “As you wish.”

They danced the New Year in at the Café de Paris, tripping down the lush carpeted stairs to the underground club. “I didn’t know they did the foxtrot in Greece!” Osla shouted over the blare of trombones, whirling through Philip’s hands. He was a fast, fierce dancer.

“I’m no Greek . . .” He spun her, and Osla was too out of breath to continue until the music relaxed to a dreamy waltz. Philip slowed, raking his disordered hair back into place before gathering Osla up with one arm about her waist. Osla put her hand in his, and they fell easily in rhythm.

“What do you mean, you’re no Greek?” she asked as couples bumped and laughed all around them. The Café de Paris had a warm intimacy that no other nightclub in London could match, maybe because it was twenty feet belowground. Music always seemed louder here, champagne colder, blood warmer, whispers more immediate.

Philip shrugged. “I was carried out of Corfu in a fruit box when I wasn’t even a year old, steps ahead of a horde of revolutionaries. I’ve not spent much time there, don’t speak much of the language, and won’t have any cause to.”

He meant he wouldn’t be king, Osla knew. She had some vague knowledge that the Greek royals had regained their throne, but Philip was far down the line of succession, and with his English grandfather and English uncle, he looked and sounded like any royal cousin. “You sound more English than I do.”

“You’re Canadian—”

“—and none of the girls I came to court with would ever let me forget it. But until I was ten, I had a German accent.”

“Are you a Hun spy?” He raised an eyebrow. “I don’t know any military secrets worth seducing me for, but I hope that doesn’t put you off.”

“You’re very ill behaved for a prince. A positive menace.”

“All the best ones are. Why the German accent?”

“My mother divorced my father and came to England when I was small.” Osla revolved under his hand in a spin, came back into the curve of his arm again. “She stuck me in the country with a German governess, where I spoke only German Mondays-Wednesdays-Fridays, and only French Tuesdays-Thursdays-Saturdays. Until I went to boarding school, I only spoke English one day a week, and everything with a German accent.”

“A Canadian who sounds like a German and lives in England.” Philip switched to German himself. “Which country really has a claim on the heart of Osla Kendall?”

“England für immer, mein Prinz,” Osla replied, and switched back before they really could be accused of being Hun spies in this room full of tipsy, patriotic Londoners. “Your German’s perfect. Did you speak it at home?”

He laughed, but the laugh had a sharp edge. “What do you mean, ‘home’? Right now I’m on a camp bed in Uncle Dickie’s dining room. Home is where there’s an invitation or a cousin.”

“I know something about that.”

He looked skeptical.

“Right now I share digs with Sally. Before that, there were some dreadful cousins in Montreal who didn’t want me. Before that, my godfather let me stay with him while I did the Season.” Osla shrugged. “My mother has a permanent suite in Claridge’s, where I’m de trop if I stay longer than a night, and my father died years ago. I couldn’t tell you where home is.” She smiled, very bright. “I’m certainly not going to get in a flap about it! All my friends who still live at home are dying to get away, so who’s the lucky one?”

“Right now?” Philip’s hand curled against her waist. “Me.”

They waltzed in silence for a while, bodies moving in perfect ease. The dance floor was sticky with spilled champagne; the band dragged. It was near four in the morning, but the floor was still packed. No one wanted to stop, and that included Osla. She looked over Philip’s shoulder and saw a poster pinned to the wall, one of the ubiquitous victory posters that had sprouted like mushrooms all over London: WE BEAT ’EM BEFORE, WE’LL BEAT ’EM AGAIN!

“I wish the war would get going,” Osla said. “This waiting . . . we know they’re going to come at us. Part of me wishes they’d just do it. The sooner it’s begun, the sooner it’s over.”

“I suppose,” he said shortly, and moved so his cheek was at her hair and they weren’t eye to eye anymore. Osla could have kicked herself. All well and good to say you wished the war would kick off when you, being one of the gentler sex, wouldn’t be the one fighting it. Osla believed everyone should fight for king and country, but she was also aware that this was a very theoretical position when you were female.

“I do want to fight,” Philip said into Osla’s hair as though reading her mind. “Go to sea, do my bit. Mainly so people will stop wondering if I’m secretly a Hun.”

“What?”

“Three of my sisters married Nazis. Not that they were Nazis when they first . . . Well. I’d like to shut up the fellows who think I’m slightly suspect because of the family sympathies.”

“I’d like to shut up the ones who think a dizzy debutante can’t possibly do anything useful. Do you go to sea soon?”

“I don’t know. If I had my way, I’d be on a battleship tomorrow. Uncle Dickie’s seeing what he can do. It could be next week, it could be a year.”

Make it a year, Osla thought, feeling his shoulder firm and angular under her hand. “So, you’ll be at sea hunting U-boats, and I’ll be banging rivets in Slough—not too shabby for a silly socialite and a slightly suspect prince.”

“You could do more than bang rivets.” He gathered her closer, not taking his cheek from her hair. “Have you asked Uncle Dickie if there’s anything at the War Office for a girl with your language skills?”

“I’d rather build Hurricanes, get my hands dirty. Do something more important for the fight than bang typewriter keys.”

“The fight—is that why you finagled your way back from Montreal?”

“If your country is in danger and you’re of age to stand and defend it, you do so,” Osla stated. “You don’t cash in on your Canadian passport—”

“Or your Greek passport—”

“—and bunk out for a safer port of call. It’s just not on.”

“Couldn’t agree more.”

The waltz ended. Osla stepped back, looked up at the prince. “I should get back to my digs,” she said regretfully. “I’m knackered.”

Philip motored Osla and the yawning Sally back to Old Windsor, driving as ferociously as he danced. He helped Sally out of the backseat; she gave his cheek a sleepy peck and negotiated her way across the dark street. Osla heard a splash and a yelp, then Sally’s voice called back sourly: “Mind your shoes, Os, there’s a lake in front of our door . . .”

“Better put my boots back on,” Osla laughed, reaching for her diamanté buckles, but Philip swung her up into his arms.

“Can’t risk the glass slippers, princess.”

“Oh, really, now,” Osla hooted, settling her arms about his neck. “How slick can you get, sailor?”

She could almost feel his grin as he carried her through the dark. Osla’s boots and evening bag dangled against his back, hanging from her elbow, and he smelled of aftershave and champagne. Philip’s hair was mussed and sweat-damp from dancing, curling softly against her fingers where her hands linked at the back of his neck. He splashed through the puddle, and before he could set Osla down on the step, she brushed her lips against his.

“Gets it out of the way,” she said, flippant. “So there’s none of that terribly awkward will-we-won’t-we on the step.”

“I’ve never had a girl kiss me just to get it out of the way.” His mouth smiled against hers. “At least do it properly . . .”

He kissed her again, long and leisurely, still holding her off the step. He tasted like a blue, sun-warmed sea, and at some point Osla dropped her boots into the puddle.

At last he set her down, and they stood a moment in the darkness, Osla getting her breath back.

“I don’t know when I’ll go to sea,” he said at last. “Before I do, I’d like to see you again.”

“Nothing much to do around here. When we aren’t banging Dural, Sal and I eat porridge and muck about with gramophone records. Very dull.”

“I don’t imagine you’re as dull as that. In fact, I’ll wager the opposite. I’ll lay odds you’re hard to get over, Osla Kendall.”

Any number of light, flirtatious replies sprang to her lips. She had flirted all her life, instinctively, defensively. You play that same game, she thought, looking at Philip. Be charming to all, so no one gets too close. There were always people angling to get close to a pretty brunette whose godfather was Lord Mountbatten and whose father had bequeathed her a massive chunk of Canadian National Railway shares. And Osla was willing to bet there were many more people angling to get close to a handsome prince, even one tarnished by Nazi brothers-in-law.

“Come see me any night, Philip,” Osla said simply, playing no games at all, and felt her heart thumping as he touched his fingers to his hat and walked back to the Vauxhall. It was the dawn of 1940, and she had danced in the New Year in a boiler suit and satin sandals with a prince. She wondered what else the year would bring.

Chapter 3

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June 1940

Mab was doing her best to disappear into her library copy of Vanity Fair, but even Becky Sharp flinging a dictionary out a coach window couldn’t hold her attention when the train leaving London was so crowded, and when the man in the seat opposite was fondling himself through his trouser pocket.

“What’s your name?” he’d crooned when Mab dragged her brown cardboard suitcase aboard, and she’d shot him her iciest glare. He’d been forced off to one side when the compartment filled up with men in uniform, most of them trailing hopefully after a stunning brunette in a fur-trimmed coat. But as the train chugged north out of London, the compartment emptied of soldiers stop by stop, and when it was just Mab and the brunette, the fondler began crooning again. “Give us a smile, luv!” Mab ignored him. There was a newspaper on the compartment floor, tracked with muddy boot prints, and she was trying to ignore that too—the headline screamed Dunkirk and disaster.

“We’re next,” Mab’s mother had said as Denmark fell, Norway fell, Belgium fell, Holland fell, one after another like boulders rolling inexorably off a cliff. Then ruddy France fell, and Mrs. Churt gave even bleaker shakes of the head. “We’re next,” she said to everyone who would listen, and Mab nearly bit her head off. Mum, would you mind not talking about murdering, raping Huns and what they’re going to do to us? It had been a terrible row, the first of many once Mab had tried to persuade Mum to leave London with Lucy. Just for a while, she said, and Mum retorted, I leave Shoreditch feetfirst, in a box.

And that row had been so bad, it was just as well that Mab had received this odd summons a week ago about a post in Buckinghamshire. Lucy didn’t really understand she was going away; when Mab had hugged her tight that morning before departing, she’d just put her head on one side and said “’Night!” which meant See you tonight!

I won’t be seeing you tonight, Luce. Mab had never been away from Lucy overnight, not once.

Well, Mab would take the train back to London the first day she had off. Whatever this post was, there had to be days off, even in wartime. And maybe her living situation in—what was this town called again?—would be decent enough she could see about moving her family here to the country. Better the middle of nowhere among green fields than soon-to-be-bombed London . . . Mab shuddered and went back to Vanity Fair, where Becky Sharp was headed for a new job in the country too, not appearing to worry much about her homeland’s being invaded. But in Becky’s day it had been Napoléon, and Napoléon didn’t have bloody Messerschmitts, did he?

“What’s your name, lovely?” The fondler had switched his attentions to the little brunette in the fur-trimmed coat, who was now the only other passenger in the compartment. His hand began to work away in his pocket. “Just one smile, gorgeous—”

The brunette looked up from her own book, flushing pink, and Mab wondered if she’d have to intervene. Normally she abided by a Londoner’s strict rule of keep your nose out of other folks’ business, but the brunette looked like an absolute lamb in the woods. Just the sort of female Mab both slightly resented and also envied—expensively dressed, pampered skin that a gushy novel would describe as alabaster, the sort of pocket-sized figure all women wanted and all men wanted to take a bite out of. The kind of silly overbred debutante, in short, who had grown up riding ponies and wouldn’t have to lift a finger to bag herself a husband of means and education, but was otherwise completely useless. Any Shoreditch girl could handle a train compartment lothario, but this little bit of crumpet was going to get munched right up.

Mab laid down Vanity Fair with a thump, irritated with the fondler and rather irritated with the brunette too for needing rescuing. But before she could even snap Look here, you . . . the brunette spoke up.

“My goodness, look at the tent in your trousers. I can’t say I’ve ever seen anything quite so obvious. Most fellows do something incredibly creative with their hats at this stage.”

The man’s hand froze. The brunette put her head to one side, eyes widening innocently. “Is something wrong? You aren’t in pain, are you? Chaps always act like they’re in such pain at this point, I’m nobbled if I know why . . .”

The fondler, Mab observed, was red as a beet and had withdrawn his hand from his pocket.

“. . . Really, do you need a doctor? You’re looking absolutely in the basket—”

The man fled the compartment with a mutter. “Feel better soon!” the little brunette called after him, then looked over at Mab, eyes sparkling. “That fixed him.” She flung one silk-stockinged leg over the other with evident satisfaction.

“Nice work,” Mab couldn’t help but say. Not such an easily munched bit of crumpet after all, even if the girl didn’t look a day over eighteen. “If I have to get rid of a fellow like that, I rely on a good icy stare or a kick in the shins.”

“I can’t do an icy stare to save my life. This face simply won’t glower. If I try, fellows tell me I look adorable, and there’s nothing to make you flip your wicket like being told you’re adorable when you’re furious. Now, you’re clearly tall, and you’ve got eyebrows like an empress, so I’m sure you have a very impressive glare?” Tilting her head in invitation.

Mab had been about to retreat into her book, but she couldn’t resist. Arching one brow, she looked down her nose and let her lip curl.

“Now that’s a slap-up stare to freeze the marrow!” The brunette put out a hand. “Osla Kendall.”

Mab shook it, surprised to feel calluses. “Mab Churt.”

“Mab, that’s topping,” Osla approved. “I was going to guess Boadicea or Scarlett O’Hara; someone who could drive a chariot with knives or shoot Yankees on staircases. I got stuck with Osla because my mother went to Oslo and said it was too too utterly divine. What she meant was that I was conceived there. So now I’m named after a city that is being crawled over by Germans, and I’m trying not to take it as a prediction.”

“Could be worse. What if you’d been conceived in Birmingham?” Mab was still trying to make sense of the girl’s work-roughened hands in contrast to her Mayfair drawl. “Surely those calluses didn’t come from finishing school.”

“From building Hurricanes at the Hawker Siddeley factory in Colnbrook.” Osla saluted. “Who knows what I’ll be doing now. I was called to interview in London, and then the strangest summons arrived telling me to go to Bletchley station—”

“But that’s where I’m going.” Startled, Mab dug out the letter in her handbag, much puzzled over when it had arrived in Shoreditch. Turning, she saw an identical letter in Osla’s hand. They held the sheets side by side. Osla’s letter read:

typewritten message

Please report to Station X at Bletchley station, Buckinghamshire, in seven days’ time.

Your postal address is Box 111, c/o the Foreign Office. That is all you need to know.

Commander Denniston

end typewritten message

Mab’s was more official—I am desired by the Chief Clerk to inform you that you have been selected for the appointment of Temporary Clerk . . . you should attend for duty in four days’ time, traveling by the 10:40 a.m. train from London (Euston) to the third stop (Bletchley)—but the destination was clearly the same.

“Curiouser and curiouser.” Osla looked thoughtful. “Well, I’m dished—never so much as heard of Bletchley or Station X.”

“Me either,” said Mab, and wished she’d said “Nor I.” Osla’s polished voice and breezy slang were making her self-conscious. “I had an interview in London, too—they asked me about my typing and shorthand. They must’ve got my name from the secretarial course I took last year.”

“They didn’t ask me about typing at all. This hatchet of a woman tested my German and my French, then told me to run along home. About two weeks later, this.” Osla tapped the letter. “What can they want us for?”

Mab shrugged. “I’ll put my hours in for the war doing whatever they want. What matters to me is earning a wage to send home, and being close enough to London to visit every day off.”

“Don’t be so prosy! We could be walking right into our own Agatha Christie novel here, The Mystery of Station X . . .”

Mab adored Agatha Christie. “Murder at Station X: A Hercule Poirot Mystery . . .”

“I prefer Miss Marple,” Osla said decidedly. “She’s exactly like every spinster governess I ever had. Just with arsenic instead of chalk.”

“I like Poirot.” Mab crossed her legs, aware that her shoes, no matter how carefully she’d shined them, looked cheap next to Osla’s hand-stitched pumps. At least my legs are just as good as hers, Mab couldn’t help thinking. Better. That felt rather petty and mean-spirited, but Osla Kendall was so clearly a girl who had everything . . . “Hercule Poirot would give a girl like me a fair hearing,” she went on. “The Miss Marples of the world take one look and decide I’m a tart.”

When the train drew to the third stop at last, Osla whooped “Tallyho!” but Mab’s hopes soon waned.

Half a mile of suitcase dragging from the dreary, crowded station led them to an eight-foot chained fence topped by rolls of barbed wire. The gates were manned by two bored-looking guardsmen. “Can’t come in here,” one said as Mab rummaged for her papers. “Got no pass.”

Mab brushed her hair out of her face. This morning she’d set it into perfect waves with kirby grips, and now she was sweaty and annoyed and her waves were falling out. “Look here, we don’t know what we’re supposed to—”

“Come to the right place, then,” said the guard in a country accent she could barely understand. “Most of ’em here look as if they didn’t know where they was, and God knows what they’m doing.”

Mab gave him the icy stare, but Osla stepped forward, all wide eyes and trembling lips, and the older guard took pity. “I’ll escort you up to the main house. If you want to know where you are,” he added, “you’re at Bletchley Park.”

“What is that?” Mab demanded.

The younger guard sniggered. “It’s the biggest bloody lunatic asylum in Britain.”

[no ornament]

The mansion looked out over a rolling green expanse of lawn and a small lake—redbrick Victorian with a green copper dome, stuck all over with windows and gables like a Christmas pudding studded with glacé cherries. “Lavatory Gothic,” Osla shuddered, but Mab stared enchanted, unable to keep herself from wandering off the path toward the lake. A proper country house and grounds like Thornfield Hall or Manderley, the kind of house that eligible bachelors were always renting in novels. But even here, war had placed its ugly mass-produced boot firmly on both mansion and personnel. Hideous prefabricated huts dotted the grounds, and people rushed haphazardly across the paths—fewer men in uniform than Mab was used to seeing in London, and certainly more women than she was expecting. They hurried between the huts and mansion in tweeds, knits, and abstracted expressions.

“They all look like they strayed into a labyrinth with no exit,” Osla observed, following Mab toward the lake as the guard stood looking impatient on the path.

“Exactly. Where do you think we—”

They both halted. Crawling out of the lake, soaking wet, plastered with reeds, and clutching a tea mug, was a naked man.

“Oh, hullo,” he called cheerfully. “New recruits? About bally time. You go on back, David,” he called up to the waiting guard. “I’ll take ’em up to the mansion.”

Mab saw with some relief that the man wasn’t entirely naked, just stripped down to his drawers. Above them he had a freckled, concave chest; a face like an amiable gargoyle’s; and hair that even soaking wet was clearly as red as a telephone box. “I’m Talbot, Giles Talbot,” he explained in an Oxbridge drawl, wandering over to a heap of clothes on the bank as Osla and Mab murmured their introductions and tried not to stare. “Took a jump in the lake after Josh Cooper’s tea mug. He chucked it into the reeds, working through some problem or other. Trousers,” Giles Talbot muttered, shaking out his clothes. “If those buggers in Hut 4 hid them again—”

“Can you tell us where we’re supposed to go?” Mab interrupted, irritated. “There has to be someone in charge of this madhouse.”

“You’d think, wouldn’t you?” Giles Talbot buttoned his shirt, then shrugged into an old checked jacket. “Commander Denniston is the closest we’ve got to a warden. Right-ho, follow me.”

Hopping first on one foot and then on the other to pull his shoes over bare feet, he set off toward the mansion, shirttails flapping over wet drawers and bare white legs. Mab and Osla looked at each other. “It’s all a front,” Osla whispered. “We’re going to be drugged as soon as we set foot into that hideous house and then sold into durance vile, just you wait.”

“If they were trying to lure us into durance vile, they’d send someone more appetizing than a half-naked stork,” Mab said. “What is durance vile, anyway . . .”

The mansion’s entrance hall was oak-paneled and spacious, with rooms branching off each side. There was a pegboard with a copy of the London Times pinned up, a Gothic-looking lounge, a grand staircase visible through a pink marble arcade . . . Giles whisked them upstairs into what looked like a bay-windowed bedroom turned private office, bed replaced by cabinets, everything reeking of cigarette smoke. A small harassed-looking man with a professorial forehead looked up from the desk. He didn’t sputter at the sight of Giles’s naked legs, just remarked, “You found Cooper’s tea mug?”

“And some new recruits, fresh off the London train. Aren’t they getting prettier? Miss Kendall here could whistle a chap off a branch any day of the week.” Giles beamed at Osla, then looked up at Mab, who topped him by half a head. “Lord, I love a tall woman. You’re not pining for some RAF pilot, are you? Don’t break my heart!”

Mab pondered getting out the icy stare but put it away unworn. This entire atmosphere was simply too strange to offend.

“You’re a fine one to talk about looks, Talbot. I’ve never seen anything as unappetizing as you lot of skinny Cambridge boffins.” Commander Denniston—at least, that’s who Mab presumed it was—shook his head at Giles’s bare white legs, then looked at Osla and Mab’s identification and letters. “Kendall . . . Churt . . .”

“My godfather might have been the one who put my name forward,” Osla prompted. “Lord Mountbatten.”

He brightened. “Then Miss Churt will be the one from the London secretarial pool.” He gave back their papers, rising. “Right. You have both been recruited to Bletchley Park, the headquarters of GC & CS.”

What’s that? Mab wondered.

As if reading her mind, Giles volunteered, “Golf, Cheese, and Chess Society.”

Commander Denniston looked pained but plowed on. “You’ll be assigned a hut, and your head of hut will fill you in on your duties. Before that happens, my job is to impress upon you that you will be working in the most secret place in Britain, and all activities here are crucial to the outcome of the war.”

He paused. Mab stood frozen, and she could feel Osla at her side equally motionless. Bloody hell, Mab thought. What is this place?

He continued. “The work here is so secret that you will be told only what it is necessary for you to know, and you will never seek to find out more. Besides respecting internal security, you will be mindful of external security. You will never mention the name of this place, not to your family or friends. You will find that your colleagues refer to it as BP, and you will do the same. Above all, you will never disclose to anyone the nature of the work that you do here. To reveal the least hint might jeopardize the whole progress of the war.”

Another pause. Are they training us to be spies? Mab wondered, astonished.

“Should anyone ask, you are doing ordinary clerical work. Make it sound dull, the duller the better.”

Osla piped up, “What work will we be doing, sir?”

“Good God, girl, have you listened to a single word I’ve said?” Impatience crept into Denniston’s voice. “I don’t know what you will be doing, in any specific way, and I don’t want to know.” He opened a desk drawer and took out two sheets of yellowish paper, laying one in front of each of them. “This is the Official Secrets Act. It clearly states that if you do any of the things I have warned you against, if you disclose the slightest information which could be of use to the enemy, you will be guilty of treason.”

The silence was absolute.

“And treason,” Commander Denniston finished mildly, “makes you liable to the most extreme penalties of the law. I’m not sure at the moment whether that’s hanging or firing squad.”

It couldn’t get any quieter, but Mab felt the silence congeal. She took a deep breath. “Sir, are we allowed to—refuse this post?”

He looked startled. “There’s no pistol to your head; this isn’t Berlin. Refuse, and you will simply be ushered off the premises with strict instructions never to mention this place again.”

. . . And I’ll never know what really goes on here, Mab thought.

He laid two pens before them. “Sign, please. Or not.”

Mab took another breath and signed across the bottom. She saw Osla doing the same.

“Welcome to BP,” Commander Denniston said with the first smile of the exchange. Just like that, the interview was over. Giles Talbot, still with his damp shirttails flapping, steered them out into the hall. Osla gripped Mab’s hand once the door shut behind them, and Mab wasn’t too proud to grip back.

“Wouldn’t take it too seriously if I were you.” Incredibly, Giles was chuckling. “That speech is a knee-weakener the first time you hear it—Denniston was out when it was my turn, and I got the whole harangue from a wing commander who pulled a pistol out of his drawer and said he’d shoot me if I broke the sacred secrecy of et cetera, et cetera. But you get used to it. Come along, let’s get your billets sorted—”

Mab halted at the staircase, folding her arms. “Look here, can’t we get a hint now about what this place actually does?”

“Isn’t it obvious?” He looked surprised. “GC & CS—we call it Golf, Cheese, and Chess Society because the place is packed with Oxford dons and Cambridge chess champions, but it stands for Government Code & Cypher School.”

Mab and Osla must have looked baffled, because he grinned.

“We’re breaking German codes.”