

the
LIBRARIANS
of LISBON

ONE

October 1943

Selene Delmont draped an arm across the bar and surveyed the casino's elegant gaming room, wondering who might want to dance with her, and who might want her dead.

The knife tucked into her garter was cold and unfamiliar against her skin. It would stay on her at all times. Colonel Briggs's parting words on the last day of training at the Farm rang in her head.

"Cleverness will get you secrets. Trust will get you killed."

She'd have to heed that advice tonight.

At last Selene was in Lisbon, thousands of miles away from everything—and every person—she wanted to forget. What a relief, to be beyond the reach of her family name. In Boston, she'd never been free of it, no matter that three years had passed since she'd been disowned. She was an heiress fallen from grace—reduced to working in a public library. It was unheard of. She couldn't escape her own name, or its limitations.

Here, though, she was unknown. And that anonymity was key to her role.

"Another drink, *senhora?*" The bartender nodded toward her empty coupe.

"Champagne, please."

Selene sipped from her fresh glass while her eyes slowly scanned the crowd, her ears perked for information.

Suzanne Nelson

She'd been told her liaison was here. She just had to find them.

"Your contact will have an orchid," Colonel Briggs's telegram had read.

She'd identified a dozen other players from the cast of characters she'd memorized, but so far, the "Orchid" had eluded her.

The Casino Estoril was the sun around which Lisbon revolved, full of stunning women in luxurious gowns, and dashing tuxedo-clad men. They glided around the card tables with the lithe, purposeful movements of performers on a stage. The whir of the roulette wheel and the rattle of dice punctuated the jazz drifting in from the ballroom. It hardly seemed possible that anyone in this casino was as dangerous as she'd heard, but Selene knew otherwise.

Since Portugal's prime minister, António de Oliveira Salazar, had declared the country's neutrality, Lisbon had become a tempest of Allied *and* Axis operations.

Lisbon's sprawling port along the Tagus River was one of the only remaining open gateways in Europe, and the capital was filled with refugees seeking safety, and chancers hoping to profit from them.

Here tonight, there was Baron von Hoyningen-Huene, the German ambassador, winning—and, Selene suspected, cheating—at the baccarat table. The French Countess Elise Archambeau was playing roulette and languishing on the arm of her lover, José Barbedo, one of Salazar's most trusted advisors. Rafael Delgado, an exiled Spanish noble and rumored Nazi sympathizer, had a woman on each arm as he played *chemin de fer*. These were just a few of the shrewd elites who made up this evening's social tableau—outcast nobility, the Reich's devotees, and Salazar's puppets.

In this ruthless hotbed of spies, information was the highest commodity. And Selene was now one of them, dealing in deception like the rest.

Selene tracked them all as she drank and matched men's admiring gazes with smiles. She didn't yet know the reason behind the directive she'd been given—to listen, observe, charm. It would be the Orchid's job to relay the details of her mission later. Her performance tonight,

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as a tempting distraction or—better yet—an innocent confidante, would be the first of many tests she'd have to pass.

She'd chosen her sequined gown carefully, aware of how it clung to her curves and showcased her pale blue eyes. As a child, she'd been mystified by her mother's coquettish poise and its effect on men. She soon began emulating her, hopeful to finally gain her mother's approval. She never did, but instead learned the power her own body could wield over others.

During training, the colonel had instructed her to "let those lovely legs of yours do the sweet-talking." Briggs's roving gaze was repugnant, but Selene wasn't under any delusions. She'd gotten this job with her looks, but she would master it with her wits. Being catnip for tigers might be perilous, but it could also be wickedly amusing.

A cacophony of languages buzzed around her—Portuguese, French, German, Japanese—all combining with laughter, music, and the clink of cocktail glasses. Selene listened keenly for clues to help her identify the Orchid. She'd only had a month of hurried

Portuguese before her departure from the States, but she could carry on conversations, albeit imperfectly. She was already fluent in French and German, thanks to the language courses she'd taken at Wellesley.

Her first year of college, Selene had argued for a botany degree, but the only science her mother would agree to was library science.

Back then, her parents' purse strings had controlled her fate. Her education was one of many battles she'd lost to her mother.

"Men want wives who make witty repartee at dinner parties, not wives who are smarter than they are," she told Selene. "Your most important accomplishment in life will be your marriage and children."

That had been six years ago—before she'd left her parents' sterile estate in Newport for good, before she'd met her best friend, Bea, at the Boston Library, before the fateful day when she'd seen the war department's recruiting poster calling for educated women with "star-spangled hearts" to join the fight. Six years ago, and an entirely different universe from this place.

Suzanne Nelson

Selene scanned the room once more. A woman wearing a red flower in her hair approached from the *chemen de fer* table. The Orchid? The woman's eyes locked on Selene's.

Selene held her breath, waiting for the prearranged signal. The woman's step quickened, but her expression turned sinister as she drew near. Something glinted in her right hand. A knife? Maybe this woman wasn't a friend, but an enemy. On instinct, Selene reached into her clutch, closing her hand around her Colt 1908.

"Small but lethal," Colonel Briggs had assured.

Selene steadied her bag against her waist, ready to fire the pistol if a knife revealed itself.

Suddenly, two tuxedo-clad men caught the approaching woman by her elbows. Selene recognized the dark-haired mustachioed man from the files she'd studied during her training. He was Captain Agostinho Lourenço, the head of PVDE, Polícia de Vigilância e Defesa do Estado, the Portuguese secret police.

"It's pointless to cause a scene." Captain Lourenço slipped handcuffs around the woman's wrists. "Come quietly and it will go easier for you."

The woman's calm smile belied her predicament. "Such a shame I have to leave the party. I was enjoying myself."

She took three steps in their custody, then stopped, her face paling. Spittle formed in the corner of her mouth. She faltered, then crumpled to the carpet.

"*Merda*, she's done it," Captain Lourenço said as she writhed.

Within seconds, she was dead. The glinting object rolled from her hand. It wasn't a knife. It was a necklace with a bullet-shaped pendant. Selene kept her expression placid as blood pounded in her veins. She knew what had been hidden inside the pendant: a cyanide pill. She'd been issued a similarly deadly trinket.

An unsettling hush fell over the room. All faces turned toward the prone figure on the carpet.

"Suicide," came a whisper from the crowd.

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Selene shivered. This woman, even if she'd been the enemy, hadn't been targeting her. But she wasn't the Orchid, either. The flower in her hair was a rose. She had to have been another agent—compromised, clearly—and she'd just taken her secrets to the grave.