

≡ CHAPTER I ≡

October 1943

Everything around me whispered lies.

Artificial moonlight spilled into a manufactured alley, slowly filling with fake fog. Real haze didn't have a stench. Yet the vapors reeked of burnt toast—most likely a reaction from chemicals exposed to the heating element. But I, Amelie Blake, didn't get paid to analyze components of a Hollywood fog machine. I got paid to deceive. To trick the multitudes into believing I was someone else—otherwise known as an actress.

A menacing figure stepped from the shadows. "There's nowhere to run." The man's voice carried as much steel as the gun in his gloved hand.

My face obediently twisted, feigning a panic I didn't feel. I was entirely safe. On this imitation backstreet inside Stage 23, my only possibility for harm would be a foolish trip over camouflaged wire.

"No!" I reeled, my shoulder blades scraping the artificial wall. "I beg you!"

The assailant raised his weapon higher, my cue to release an ear-splitting scream. Passable, but not my best effort. How could I feel anything but an imposter, staring down the barrel of a pistol, while millions of soldiers across the Atlantic faced weapons that shot more than full-load blanks?

The world was being ravaged, but in this corner of the planet, I stood in a shimmering evening gown designed by Orry-Kelly, playing make-believe in front of a boxy camera.

The villain's thumb clicked the gun's hammer. "No one to save you now, lady."

"That's where you're wrong." Phillip Gregory, the other top-billing actor, lunged in front of the enemy, and the choreographed fight scene commenced. A dodged punch here. A jab to the gut there.

Once—just once—I'd love a role where the leading lady joined the fray, helping the hero in the climactic attack rather than standing aside as a horrified spectator. Better yet, what if the heroine defended herself from the get-go? Such a move would defy the age-old damsel-in-distress formula, but wouldn't it be more inspiring to have the bad guy subdued and bound *before* the hero arrived?

But that wasn't how the script went.

Keeping angled toward the camera, I shrieked and gasped at the appropriate times until the gun fell from the villain's limp hand. Hopefully, this actor could play dead better than the gentleman from my last picture. I swear one could see the rise and fall of his chest from a kilometer away.

The camera swung to me, and I threw my arms around Phil, thankful my tear ducts produced the right amount of drips down my cheeks. If not, the director would force a retake and dump glycerin on my face. "I was so scared. It was horrible," I said on a sob, inwardly wincing because, once again, the writers made my character a raving idiot. Which would only confirm what the average moviegoer already suspected. All of America, perhaps the world, thought me the brainless blond. "I knew you'd come."

He crushed me to his chest and kissed me. "I'll always come for you."

"Cut!" Our director's booming voice could split the concrete beneath my heels. "That's a wrap, folks. Send it to the team for edits."

The crew dispersed in a chaotic din. Microphones lowered. Lenses capped. The villain, who was actually a gentle father of four, revived and dusted off his trousers.

I disentangled from Phil's arms, and he shot me a wink. "What do ya say, Amelie? Want to grab a celebration lunch? I sniff an Oscar with this film."

I sniffed something spicy. Phil was notorious for drenching all his clothes, costumes included, in his expensive cologne. Though now the scent clung to me, thanks to the embrace we just shared. "Sorry, Phil. I can't."

He waved at the prop director, then focused those dark eyes on me with a dimple-dented grin. “Dinner, then? I can make us a reservation at the Ferris Wheel.”

The Ferris Wheel? Phil wasn’t after a meal but publicity. The swanky restaurant stocked more tabloid reporters than filets. There were already bogus rumors about a hot romance between Phil and me. Showing up together at a place like that would only douse that spark of gossip with kerosene. No thank you. My heart still bore third-degree burns from the last actor who’d placed fame over human decency. “I can’t because—”

“She already has plans.” A well-dressed gentleman, no more than a few years older than my twenty-six, stepped between Phil and me. “Miss Blake, I’m Henrik Zoltan’s driver. I’m here to pick you up for your lunch meeting.”

It was a struggle to keep my brows from lifting. I hadn’t spoken to Henrik since my return from the capital, but I was certain we hadn’t anything scheduled. Henrik Zoltan was an illustrious movie producer and director. A soft-spoken, middle-aged Hungarian, he was responsible for several propaganda films, boosting the morale of a battle-wearied country.

He was also a spy.

My mouth slanted into a smile. “I must’ve forgotten. How silly of me.”

“*The Henrik Zoltan.*” Phil’s eyes widened. “You’re not going to sign a contract with him, are you?” His voice lowered. “What about the plans for our sequel?” An admirable job of keeping the desperation from his tone, but he failed to keep it from his eyes.

I shrugged. “It’s only lunch.”

Phil led me aside, shooting skeptical glances at Henrik’s driver. His voice dipped even more. “Henrick Zoltan’s a Hungarian. You can’t trust foreigners.”

“So I can’t trust you?” I asked in a chipper tone, which only made the confusion on his face all the more satisfying.

“But. . . I’m American.”

“And I’m Swedish.” I gave his tie a playful tug. “Which makes *you* a foreigner to *me*.”

He breathed a laugh. “I forget you’re not from here. You fit in so naturally.”

That wasn’t always the case. The move to America had been more

difficult than I imagined. All the hours with a voice coach to strip the accent from my tongue. Lonely evenings and holidays because my sole family member stubbornly remained in Stockholm. And now a global war separated me from reaching her. “I shouldn’t keep Henrik waiting.”

After a swift change from my gown to a smart dress suit, I followed the hired driver outside to where a Plymouth sedan sat idling.

The rear passenger door opened, and cigar smoke billowed out in lazy plumes.

I leaned down, peering into the haze. “Have you come to challenge me to another game of billiards?”

“No.” His eyes narrowed behind his glasses. “Hop in, Amelie. We’ve much to discuss.”

I lingered an extra second, inflating my lungs with a fortifying breath, then lowered onto the plush seat. “Much to discuss?” I asked when the driver shut the door. “I don’t remember planning this little tête-à-tête.”

Henrik tapped his stogie on a bronze ashtray on the seat beside him with two decided raps. “We’ll talk in a few moments.” Then he shifted his gaze out the window, puffing on his cigar as if it were his only source of company.

The car left the studio lot. I itched to question him, but that wasn’t how Henrik operated. He would only speak when ready. So as the car’s cabin plugged with smoke because Henrik wouldn’t crack a window, my mind filled with questions. Block by block we moved almost in a crawl, Henrik taking drags on his cigar, me waving a hand about my airways, hoping he’d catch a hint. He didn’t.

Unlike most wealthy producers, Henrik wasn’t flashy. Thin-wired spectacles perched upon a knobby nose. A suit, the shade of a mud puddle, stretched over a paunchy frame. One would peg him as a languid fellow who spent the day on a park bench tossing breadcrumbs to pigeons. Dull. Unassuming.

But Henrik Zoltan was shrewd, multilingual, and no doubt neck-deep in covert activities. Something I’d discovered when he’d approached me last month.

The driver pulled onto a lot beside a café I’d never visited and promptly got out of the car. But instead of opening my door, he strolled to a cluster of outdoor tables on the far side of the building and sat.

With the chauffeur gone, Henrik slowly faced me. “Let us talk here.

When we're finished, we'll have lunch."

Henrik wasn't long-winded but more like long-paused. He took his time between remarks, as if his mind sorted and sifted each word before allowing it to leave his lips. I expected this conversation to stretch well past lunchtime, threatening to impose on my afternoon *fika*. The British may be devoted to their teatime, but the Swedes are downright adamant about their coffee break. Though not as strong these days due to rationing.

I settled against the seat. Might as well get comfortable. "This isn't about a role in your pictures, is it?" Henrik wouldn't act this secretive only to offer me a part. No, he would've summoned me to his office for that sort of business. Which only meant he needed my assistance for something else. I almost didn't want to ask.

He finally stubbed out his cigar. "Maybe I'll consider it after your service is over."

Perhaps I was wrong. "You mean, contract? I'm an independent performer now." Once my contract was up with MGM, I hadn't resigned. Just like Carole Lombard, I wished to have the freedom to select my own roles with any studio. It would be a shock to the world to watch me in any other part than the dumb blond. An opportunity I savored. "I can work wherever I like now."

His half-lidded eyes met mine. "The service I speak of is for the Allied benefit."

Ah, there it was. "Let me guess—you'd like me to sell war bonds?"
"No."

"Hmm." I made a show of tapping my chin as if in deep thought. "Am I to join Bob Hope on his next tour entertaining troops?" Though teasing, this was a sore topic for me. I'd never been asked to publicly contribute to the war effort. Fellow actors held rallies or drives. They'd use their off time to visit troops in France. All the while, I was excluded to the point society had taken notice. I'd even spotted articles speculating my loyalty.

"The call you put in to King Gustav was effective." Henrik's mild praise returned me to the moment.

"I can't take the credit. All I did was plead with him, but he was going to open the borders to the Danes anyway." I nibbled the edge of my lip, recalling the brief conversation. The king's decision to allow

refugee Jews and Christians into Sweden made me proud of my homeland. When war had broken out, my country firmly embraced the same stance it had during the first great war—neutrality.

But neutral didn't always mean safe. Denmark, Norway, Belgium, and the Netherlands didn't take sides yet were invaded by Germans nonetheless. Sweden held its breath, tiptoeing that fine line of nonbellicerence, not wanting to give the Nazis any cause to attack. By welcoming the Danes, and even the Norwegians before that, Sweden took a great risk.

Henrik made a noise. It wasn't one of assent or disapproval but one that told me absolutely nothing.

"I'm serious. King Gustav would've received the evacuees with or without my begging." Henrik had introduced me to the head of the Office of Strategic Services, Bill Donovan. I'd felt foolish when Bill had asked me to accompany him to the capital only for a transatlantic voice radio call. While international calls were extremely rare, I'd believed myself too insignificant to sway the heart of a king. King Gustav had listened to my argument, but I didn't believe I'd influenced him one way or another.

"Donovan disagrees. So does Stephenson."

As Bill Donovan was the head of clandestine operations in the United States, William Stephenson held the same role for the British. I'd spent time with both men during my visit to Washington.

Henrik pushed his glasses up the bridge of his nose. "They believe the king softened at your influence."

"But it wasn't only me. Some scientist also pleaded with the king to give the Danes asylum."

Henrik's head whipped left. Gone was his lazy approach. An uncomfortable severity sharpened his gaze, darkening the shadows under his eyes. "What do you know about it?"

My heart jumped under his intense perusal. "Only what I said. The king mentioned a scientist who spoke on behalf of the Danish Jews."

"Is that all you know?"

"Yes."

He nodded, the line of his shoulders relaxing. "The scientist is Dr. Niels Bohr. He barely escaped the Nazis' clutches in Copenhagen." He slouched in the seat, reclaiming his comfortable position. "The point I'm

making is, that call proved you're an asset."

We were talking in circles. Was this some sort of spy mind trick? Or perhaps he was stalling, trying to gauge my reaction. "The rescue was a success, right? Isn't that all that matters here?" More than seven thousand Danish Jews had been smuggled into Sweden over the past month.

"Yes. But there's more work to be done."

Of course there was. There was a powerful Nazi empire to subdue, an entire race of Jews to protect, and a world to rebuild after so much devastation. *More work* was a pitiful understatement. But since Henrik had brought up my call to the king, I suspected he wanted to make use of my connections to the Swedish officials. "Okay. Out with it, Henrik. What is it that you need me to do? Write letters? Make more transatlantic calls? Tell me my role."

His gaze latched onto mine and held. "What if I asked you to return to Sweden as a spy?"