

ROSIE RAZA

UNDERCOVER
CODEBREAKER

SUFIYA AHMED

BLOOMSBURY

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BLOOMSBURY EDUCATION
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Chapter one

June 1942

There's a full moon tonight, and my stomach is performing somersaults. Normally, the upside-down feeling of my insides happens when I'm frightened.

I'm not frightened now. Far from it.

At this moment, it's excitement I feel. And I've never felt so alive.

I clutch the safety belt that is tied across my chest as the Royal Air Force co-pilot staggers towards the door of the plane. He grips the handle and pulls it down with all his might. The steel slides open to reveal the night sky, and the gust of cold air that hits my face makes me gasp out loud.

The upside-down feeling has given way to a hammering heart.

This is it.

“Rosina.”

Papa rarely calls me by my full name. I suppose being strapped to him for a parachute jump qualifies for a formal name call.

“Yes, Papa,” I shout over the roar of the plane’s engine.

“This is it,” he shouts. “Are you ready?”

As I ever will be. I press my lips together and lean into him. I can’t help thinking that I’m like a puppet. I have no control over my limbs as I can only move in the direction that he does.

“Yes!” I shout back.

“Good. I love you!”

“I love you too, Papa.”

“Let’s go!”

We step forward to the doorway together and are just about to jump when the nose of the plane lifts into the air. Papa grabs the side rail to steady himself. The co-pilot hand-signals to us and I feel Papa’s sharp intake of breath before he throws us both backwards into the plane. Papa lands on his back, and although

I am cushioned against him, my right elbow feels as if it's smashed against a brick wall.

"Ow..." My cry of pain falls away as the plane performs a full-circle manoeuvre.

We're turning back.

Why are we turning back?

I don't ask the question aloud. This is a highly dangerous mission that Prime Minister Winston Churchill's own agency, the Special Operations Executive, has ordered.

A few minutes later, the plane starts to descend.

"Come on," Papa shouts. "Second attempt."

We stagger back to the open door and, without warning, Papa gives me a little push and we're falling through the night sky.

"Aaargghhh!" I scream.

The gravity is unrelenting as it pulls us down at breakneck speed. Whoever said parachuting out of planes is like soaring like a bird was wrong. I don't feel like I'm flying. I feel like a bird with broken wings.

And then the sensation changes. Papa has pulled the parachute cord and we are now floating in the night sky, high above the Belgian countryside.

"This is the best feeling ever!" I shout.

“We’re landing,” Papa shouts. “Remember what to do with your legs.”

Papa and I hit the ground running. It’s a perfect stop. The training Papa made me undergo in the grounds of Camberwell House, our family home, was worth it.

I, Rosie Raja, Churchill’s Spy, have landed in Belgium!

“Rosie, fold the chute,” Papa instructs as he unbuckles his flying suit.

I nod and get to work, remembering the last time I had been in a foreign field, in the middle of the night. It was last year, on my first mission in France, and I had been with my friend Jean. Our task was to collect the weapon canisters that had been dropped by British planes to aid the French Resistance. We’d even met a British spy who had parachuted down, like we’d done tonight.

“Hello.”

I look up from the tangled mess that I’ve made of the parachute. A woman stands over me. She is tall with broad shoulders and red hair that is styled into shoulder-length curls. She must be our undercover contact for the SOE’s Section T. That’s what they call the spy department that works in Belgium.

Papa steps out from behind a tree. He must have seen her approach and taken a cover position in case she wasn't one of ours. "Password."

"Operation Bumblebee."

Papa holds his hand out. "Henri."

That's his code name for this mission.

"I'm code name Brigitte," the woman draws in an American accent as her eyes flick over me. She chooses not to say anything either directly to me or about me, and I'm not forthcoming either. "I didn't think you were going to make it. Your plane flew over the landing spot the first time."

"The pilot miscalculated," Papa explains. "Thankfully he realised he'd flown too far and came back to the correct coordinates."

"It's a good thing he did," Brigitte says. "Or you'd have landed in a Nazi training camp – it's just thirty kilometres from here."

Papa mutters under his breath. Words that are probably not suitable for my ears. He looks over Brigitte's shoulder into the distance. "Where's the SOE agent you're meant to be shadowing?"

"He was swept up in a raid," she replies. "A Belgian collaborator gave his name and description to the

Nazis, and they arrested him and several others at a local Resistance meeting. I'm sorry."

Papa's jaw clenches and his eyes narrow. This is not good news. "When?"

"Two nights ago."

"And you didn't report it to headquarters?" Papa's voice is barely controlled.

"I'm still available to assist with the mission," Brigitte says in a matter-of-fact voice.

"And the canister?" Papa demands.

"It was dropped yesterday." Brigitte knows what he's referring to. "I have it."

Papa drags a hand through his hair. "So, you're working on your own now?"

"Yes," Brigitte confirms.

"Do you not see the danger you're in," Papa demands. "If your partner's tortured, he might betray your name and description. You must leave Belgium immediately."

Brigitte nods. "Thank you for the concern. I will depart just as soon as we have completed this mission."

Papa isn't happy with her answer. He doesn't want a woman who could be on the Nazi hit list hanging around with us. It puts us all in danger.

“Which American agency do you belong to?” Papa wants to know.

“Now that would be telling,” Brigitte says in a soft but firm voice.

My mouth falls open. I am not used to seeing agents or soldiers refuse to answer Papa’s questions. They never openly defy him.

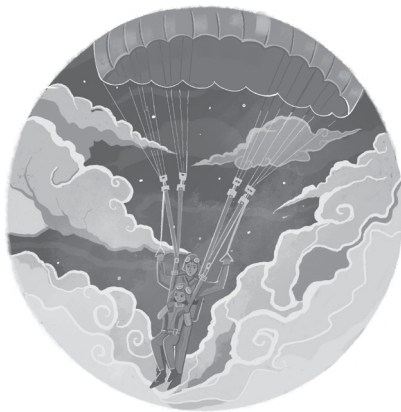
“Then tell me how long you’ve worked as a spy,” Papa says. “I need to know the level of experience I’m working with.”

“Seven years in a top agency,” Brigitte answers. “Roosevelt isn’t sending amateurs.”

She’s talking about the president of the United States.

Papa’s mouth tightens into a grim line. I can tell from his expression that he’s not best pleased. This is an important mission. So important that he allowed me, his twelve-year-old daughter, to parachute with him into a Nazi-occupied country so that he could have a convincing cover story.

Is this woman going to ruin everything?



Chapter two

Brigitte turns on her heel. “We should head to the hideout.”

Papa grabs the chute from me and crumples it into a giant ball. We both follow Brigitte as she leads us across the fields.

“Why are we working with an American?” I whisper.

“Because they’ve just joined the war,” Papa responds in a low voice. “President Roosevelt wants to replicate the SOE to sabotage and subvert the Nazis. Some of their agents have been placed with ours so they can learn tactics.”

I remember the shock we had when we were leaving Egypt at the end of our mission in Cairo. The news had just broken that the Japanese had bombed Pearl Harbour. They managed to kill two thousand, four hundred and

three American service people and destroyed nineteen US Navy ships. On top of that, sixty-eight civilians had been killed too. The United States of America had no choice but to join the war. And Prime Minister Churchill is really pleased that they have. He thinks we need their numbers on top of all the Empire's soldiers that have been fighting since the beginning of the war.

Papa and I are silent for the rest of the journey. It's a long walk across four fields and down a muddy path to a big, empty barn.

It reminds me of the outbuilding at Marie's farm in the French countryside. When Papa and I fled Paris during our French mission, it was the first place of refuge we sought. I still think about Marie. She was arrested by Nazi soldiers and taken away. Sometimes I even feel guilty. She gave herself up to save me and Jean. I hope she is alive and well, even if she is still in prison.

Brigitte lights a candle and invites us to sit on the floor. She has padded it out with hay, and I'm relieved to sink down and rest my legs. A parachute landing, followed by all that walking, has done me in.

Brigitte disappears into a dark corner and returns with a basket of baguettes and red apples. She hands out the food. "It's the best I could do," she mutters.

I glance at Papa, and he gives me the approving nod to eat. I sink my teeth into the bread and chew greedily despite the slight staleness and lack of filling.

Papa eats his food and then turns to Brigitte. “Have you been given the details of the mission?”

“Some details, yes,” she replies. “I understand that I’m to follow your lead.”

The second part of her answer is wise. It reassures Papa that she won’t jeopardise his plans. They sit in silence as I finish my baguette. Then, finally, Brigitte decides to acknowledge me. “Why have you bought a child with you?”

“This is my daughter Rosie,” Papa answers. “Her presence means we will be able to pose as a family. It will be our cover story. We’re close to the Nazi camp here and two adults will draw attention. The Nazis know about the SOE spy work with the Resistance. They are arresting anyone they suspect of being on the British side, as you know. They won’t suspect us if we are with Rosie.”

“And your daughter won’t give us away?”

Papa allows himself a little chuckle. “I think Rosie may have seen more action than you in the last year.”

“How so?” Brigitte asks.

“That’s a story for another day,” I say.

“She speaks,” Brigitte says. “What is your code name?”

“Always Rosie,” I answer, crunching on an apple.

“Always Rosie,” she repeats.

“No, I mean just Rosie...” My words fall away when I see her grin.

Brigitte turns to Papa. “Who is this person you’ve come to save from being transported to a German prison? He must be very important for you to attempt this rescue mission. What is he? An army major? A prince?”

My ears perk up to hear Papa’s answer. I’ve jumped out of a plane with him with no knowledge about our mission. Papa never tells me anything. I had no idea about Operation Blow-Up-Nazi-Weapons when we were in France. Or the fact that Papa’s real mission in Cairo was to feed false information to a double agent, which had led to the Nazis being fooled about the date of an allied attack in North Africa. I just seem to float along with him as he carries out his instructions.

I don’t complain, though. If I do, I know Papa will tell me the alternative is to go to boarding school, so I keep my mouth shut.

“He’s not high up in any rank,” Papa answers. “If he was, the Nazis would be moving him with an armed guard.”

“Then why the rescue?”

“He has information we need,” Papa says. “Information he didn’t have a chance to pass on to the British authorities before he was caught. The Nazis actually have no idea about who he is or what he knows.”

“What information?” Brigitte wants to know.

“Nazi spies that are operating in England,” Papa says. “There are spies everywhere and we must catch them.”

I keep my head down as my mind processes Papa’s words. I had no idea!

“Rosie.” Papa’s voice breaks into my thoughts. “It will soon be dawn and you need to get some rest.”

“But...” I try to object.

“Here, have this.” Brigitte throws a woolly brown blanket at me. “I don’t have a pillow, though.”

Papa picks up the chute that he had dumped in the corner and rearranges it into a pillow for me. “Now sleep.”

I curl up into a ball and close my eyes, determined to listen to their conversation. Minutes pass and not a word is spoken. I get the feeling they’re waiting for me to drift off. What top-secret facts do they need to discuss? I try to keep my exhaustion at bay but soon fall into a deep slumber.

It seems I have only been asleep for a short while when Papa wakes me with a gentle shake. My back hurts from the hard floor as I poke my head out from beneath the blanket.

“There’s a bucket of water outside,” Papa says. “Splash your face and then come and eat.”

The water is ice-cold and startles me into being fully awake. Breakfast is another baguette from the basket, which Brigitte hands to me.

“I’d like an apple instead,” I say.

Brigitte shakes her head. “The apples are props.”

I have no idea what she means but I don’t argue. We’re on a mission and I must not question what the adults say.

I chew the even-staler-than-last-night’s baguette as my mind drifts off to the time when I’d carried a basket of baguettes through the streets of Paris. The prime minister had congratulated me when we returned to London for secretly carrying a war weapon. The baguettes in my basket had hidden a radio communication set from view. I shiver as I remember the Nazi soldier who had stopped me in my tracks. I had come so close to being exposed as a British spy that day. I wonder how close we will come to Nazi soldiers today.

Papa is examining the yellow sticks of dynamite that were delivered in the canister two nights ago. He is already dressed in the clothes that came with them. The loose brown trousers, old tattered shirt, waistcoat and flat cap completes his look as a farmer.

“Change into this,” Papa says, throwing over the dress that was packed for me.

I catch it and slip behind the hay bundle. My dress is a faded blue colour and looks like it’s been mended many times. Papa has also made sure there’s a scarf I can tie around my head. During the night, my hair loosened from its plait, and straggly strands hang around my face. I use my fingers to retie it into the tightest plait I can manage and then cover it with the scarf.

Brigitte’s bright red hair is also covered, and she’s added an apron on top of her dress.

“Are we ready?” Papa asks from the doorway.

Brigitte and I join him.

“We are undercover now,” he says. “We only speak French. The other languages spoken in Belgium are Dutch and German.”

I nod. My French is very good. That’s why I was allowed to remain in France when I sneaked there on our first mission. Language skills are essential for blending in as a spy.

“Do you remember what we spoke about on the plane?” Papa’s question is directed at me. He had given me instructions on what I needed to do.

“Yes, Papa.”

“Good, let’s go.”

The three of us walk along the road, close to the train track. The dynamite is hidden in Brigitte’s basket of red apples. That’s what she meant when she called them props.

It’s early and we don’t cross paths with anyone. Or at least that’s the case until the gentle purr of a car engine creeps up on us from behind.

“What do you see, Rosie?” Papa says in a low voice.

I glance over my shoulder. The Swastika flag flutters on the bonnet of a big black car.

“Two officers in a Nazi vehicle,” I whisper.

“Keep walking,” Papa instructs.

The car passes us, and then the tyres shriek to a stop.

“Keep walking,” Papa repeats.

When we’re adjacent to the car, a Nazi officer with blond hair and blue eyes rolls down his window. “May I have a couple of your apples?” he asks politely in French.

Papa scoops up three round juicy apples and hands them over.

The officer flashes perfect white teeth and rubs one apple against his chest pocket. We stand, unsure whether to move along. The unsaid rule is that an occupied person must wait before they are dismissed by a Nazi.

The officer takes a bite of the apple and juice drips down his chin. I wonder where he was when they had been taught manners in school.

“Danke schön.” His thanks is given in German and then the car drives off.

“Keep walking,” Papa says for the third time.

It isn't until the car disappears from view that I let out the breath I've been holding.

That encounter was far too close for my liking.



Chapter three

We walk a few more kilometres along the road and then Brigitte leads us to a train track, not far from the opening of a tunnel.

“The train will pass this spot at ten thirty-four on the dot,” Brigitte says. “Are you sure your man will be on board?”

“That’s what our intelligence says,” Papa says and then turns to me. “Rosie, get the dynamite.”

I spring into action, emptying the apples on the ground to hand Papa the yellow sticks. Papa gets down on his knees and pulls string out of his pocket. One by one, he ties the sticks to the railway track.

“You two, move to hiding positions,” Papa instructs. Is he not coming with us?

“But...” I object.

“Rosie,” Papa warns.

I must obey. It’s the first rule of working under the command of Captain Camberwell. Brigitte and I run into a nearby field just as the train choo-choos out of the tunnel and into sight.

This is it. I cover my ears, waiting for impact.

When the explosion comes, my hands cannot drown out the noise, or the almighty crash of train carriages toppling on to their sides.

Then the screaming begins.

I want to run to Papa, but I know I must stay here.

The gunshots start.

“What am I doing being a babysitter?” Brigitte cries in frustration.

“Hey, I can look after myself,” I shoot back indignantly.

Brigitte bites her lip. “Promise me you’ll stay here.”

“I promise,” I say in my most convincing voice.

Brigitte gives me an odd pat on the head and speeds off in the direction of the train. Pulling the scarf from my head, I retie it so that both my face and hair is covered. I count to fifty seconds before running after her, straight into the chaos.

Only the front two carriages have flipped over. Three Nazi soldiers sit on the ground looking dazed. Their injuries look serious and they don’t seem to be aware of

what's going on around them. They must have been in the front carriages and felt the impact of the dynamite.

I back away and head towards the last carriage of the train. Papa had said that the prisoners would be at the back. I can't see him anywhere, though. A small group of women and children are huddled together on the other side of the track. Their clothes are tattered, and they look like they haven't had proper food to eat for a long time.

I'm just about to cross the track when my eyes fall on a pair of steel-capped boots standing not far from the prisoners. Those are Nazi soldier boots. I saw plenty of them in Paris last year. I take a step back and crouch behind the carriage. I understand now why the women and children still look terrified, even though they're off the prison train. They're still being guarded by Nazi soldiers.

But what I don't understand is why on earth the Nazis are transporting innocent women and children to Germany. To a prison camp. What can they have done to be treated like this? War is meant to be fought by soldiers. Men on the battlefield. Women and children are not meant to be part of that equation. They're meant to be protected. That's what my aunt, Rani-K, the queen of our Indian kingdom, always said.

I peep around the carriage and see that there are actually two Nazi soldiers prowling about the group like tigers. Then suddenly one starts shouting and waving a gun in the air. I think he wants everyone to get in line. I can see his face clearly when he turns. There's a cut on his temple which is trailing blood down the side of his face. He's injured, but still on duty. Talk about being dedicated to the lowliest of jobs.

I count the prisoners. There are five women and nine children. They seem either unable or unwilling to obey.

The soldier shouts at them again.

One of the women looks to the left as a small child clutches her skirt. I guess she's trying to calculate the distance to the field. Can she outrun the gun that will target her back? No, of course not. She can't be serious. She'll never make it, and neither will that small child who is with her.

"Don't do it," I mutter under my breath.

The woman makes her choice.

She pushes the boy away from her and turns towards the field. The movement doesn't escape the soldier and he raises his pistol at her back.

"Noooooooo!" I yell.

The element of surprise is on my side. The soldier doesn't see me coming as I lunge towards him, pushing

him to the ground with all my strength. He lands flat on his face and the impact knocks him out. The other soldier lurches towards me and grabs the end of my scarf, pulling it. It unravels, exposing my face, and my plait rolls down my shoulder. The soldier and I stare at each other for what can only be seconds but feels like a really long time. His blue eyes pierce mine and just as he raises his arm to hit me, I see those same eyes widen in shock before he falls flat on his face.

“Rosie!” Papa stands with a piece of metal from the train gripped in his hand. Brigitte and a man stand behind him.

“I had to save them,” I blurt out in French. “The soldiers were going to kill these people!”

“She’s telling the truth.” The woman who was going to run speaks up.

The other women nod frantically. It’s as if they need to save me from Papa’s anger. It works. Papa lets it go.

“This must be your daughter,” the man says. His arm is in a sling, and he has bruises around his eyes. I think he must have been tortured for information.

“I’m Rosie,” I mumble.

“I’m Laurie,” the man says.

Brigitte squats down and feels the soldier’s pulse. “He’s alive for now,” she declares.