

The Mason Wright Series

THE
SECRETS
OF
ST. JOANNA

Steven Knapp



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London, England September 1940

BLOOD. THERE WAS A LOT OF BLOOD, some dried to a dark, reddish-brown tone, some still wet on the man's chest, dripping from the cotton sheets to the floor.

How could this happen, the detective thought to himself as he quietly stared at the body of his friend. He walked slowly around the room, his footsteps creaking on the old English floorboards. The slightly overweight, middle-aged man lying on the bed in the second-floor bedroom was naked, with a sheet covering the lower half of his body. A large gash across his neck was barely visible through all the blood. This man had died a violent death, with his throat slashed, his face bruised; this crime scene was not for the faint of heart. If the police assembled outside had quietly wondered to themselves if this was a random killing, a crime of passion, or something worse, they got their answer when an investigator from the constable's office pulled up and ordered everyone out of the house. Killings like these were not an everyday occurrence in London, especially during wartime.

The investigator was interrupted by Constable Bradley leaning in at the door. "Excuse me, sir. We checked with the neighbors," he said as he looked quickly at his notes. "A Mrs. Cartwright saw a man and a woman leave the house yesterday; the man was possibly a chimney sweep. She did not know about the woman. Both in their early- to mid-forties. A black truck with the label 'Thompson Chimney Sweeps' was parked here. She said the house is normally empty so, with all the activity, she became concerned and called our office. That is

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all I could get. We are currently working on a more detailed description. She did say the woman was quite glamorous, looking a bit like a movie star.”

The investigator looked toward the doorway and nodded. “Well done, thank you,” he replied. “Get me that description right away and thank Mrs. Cartwright.”

Frank Sullivan, known to most as Sully, was a Special Assistant to the Constable Office of North London. He was only called in for Special Circumstance crimes with Wartime Security ramifications. The term Special Assistant encompassed a wide variety of duties. He ultimately reported to Winston Churchill, so his presence in the upstairs bedroom told everyone at the scene that this was something more than a random killing.

As Sully stared at the bed, he noticed something clasped in his friend's left hand. He leaned in and pried open his fingers. They cracked, as rigor mortis had begun setting in. He pulled out a crumpled piece of ripped, bloody, white paper. He unfolded it slowly, revealing the word *Totenkopf*. Under the word was a symbol of a skull with blood dripping from its mouth.

The investigator looked up from the note to the doorway, where Constable Bradley had remained, watching the scene. “What’s your name, son?”

“Bradley, sir.”

“What’s your first name?”

“Charles, sir. The boys call me Charlie.”

“Charlie, has anyone else been in this room?”

“No. We arrived fifteen minutes before you, secured the house, and then received the call to stop everything and wait for your arrival.” Bradley paused. “May I ask why all the secrecy?”

“No, you may not,” Sully replied without hesitation. “What you can do is clear the house and set up a perimeter outside and down the block. We need to secure this area immediately. No one comes in or out without my knowing about it, including Mrs. Cartwright.”

“I only have access to a few men,” Bradley replied unsteadily. “We are short because of the war effort. I will call in every available man, but it will take some time.”

“I will make a call,” Sully told Bradley without looking at him. “This man was a good friend of mine. Word of his condition does not leave this room. Understood?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Now, go secure the area. I want to be left alone in here.”

“Yes, sir, right away.” Bradley turned and left the room. He gathered the other men in the hallway and disappeared down the steps, their heavy boots shuffling against the wood floor.

Sully stared at the note and then at the body. He had seen a few crimes like this. They often were perpetrated on women, usually prostitutes. To see a man beaten, his throat slashed, was rare, even in the worst neighborhoods in London. However, the nature of the crime was not the reason Sully was standing in the second-floor bedroom of 16B Hogsmeade Road. This address was a safehouse for the War Offices of Britain, and when word came through of a discovered body, the address immediately sparked a call to the man currently standing there. When Sully had entered the bedroom, he’d quickly recognized the body on the bed as John Cleary, one of his best men. Sully stood looking at Cleary, knowing his murder was not random because of the work they both did.

Sully was an American living in Britain. His parents had emigrated to America from Wales at the turn of the century. His father had served in the American intelligence office during World War I and established a reputation as a reliable information man, eventually joining the intelligence community.

Sully followed in his father’s footsteps, relocating to London after World War I to join a special branch of service as a liaison to Britain. His reputation had earned him several promotions and his connections to the American government made him invaluable in these times. His service took him all over Europe, but he had settled in Britain when Adolf Hitler

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came to power. He worked in collaboration with the French and British governments to track the expansion of the German military over the years, as Germany had begun rebuilding its military might in March of 1935, in violation of the Treaty of Versailles. Sully's job was to track the movements of German military commanders, dignitaries, ambassadors, and spies. Still, Sully's pleas to both governments to crack down on Germany's expansion fell on deaf ears. Europe had let its guard down as Germany expanded, and now, most of western Europe was infiltrated with German agents posing as tourists. Many of them simply disappeared after arriving in Britain, and it fell on Sully to track and monitor them. He spent most of his time between London and Paris, the most fertile locations for German spies.

Sully had several contacts in both cities reporting to him about the movements of German agents under their surveillance. One of his best contacts had gone dark, and Sully had not heard from him in a few days. He was one of his most trusted men, cautious and brilliant at his job. Now, Sully realized why, as Cleary lay slain on the bed in front of him, covered in blood and holding a note with an indecipherable word and a picture of a skull. The note was a calling card left on purpose, stuffed into Cleary's dead left hand. Sully knew well enough to know this was an assassination; Cleary had been killed for what he knew.

Sully left the room and went to the other bedroom. He opened the closet door and began pulling things out. He moved several boxes and stacked them behind him against the wall. He removed some clothing and the shoe rack at the bottom of the closet, placed them next to the boxes, then grabbed the shelf with his right hand and banged underneath with the palm of his left. The shelf popped loose, exposing a gap in the paneling of the back wall. He tossed the shelf aside, placed his fingers in the opening, pulled the wooden paneling forward, and removed it from the closet.

He had known Cleary for some time, and therefore, most of his secrets. In this business, you needed a place where

things could be stored out of the public eye. This safe house had a false back in the closet in the guest room upstairs, used to store and drop information. Inside was a small radio and two boxes, one marked "Foreign," the other, "Domestic." He opened the box marked "Domestic" and flipped through the names of his agents one by one. The files contained paperwork on each agent and a history of their work. Copies of most of these documents were kept in the safe in his office, but these secondary copies were stored as backup and updated once a month. If Cleary had other notes, they might be in here.

He pulled out the file marked "Cleary," stood up, walked over, and placed it on the bed. He opened it and started to quickly read the pages, looking for any mention of *Totenkopf*. Cleary had been surveilling several people, but which had gotten him killed? Sully continued reading the file, finding no mention of the word. As he reached the end, however, he found a few pages of handwritten notes. This was what he was looking for. At the top of the page, the word "*Totenkopf?*" was circled in red ink. Under that were some notes: "*Hashshashin,*" "Ancient order?" "Modern version?" "occult." At the bottom of the page was an address: 24 Holston Street. Underneath that, a name: "Mason Wright?"

Keeping the handwritten notes, Sully put the rest of the files in the covered box and placed it back in the wall. He popped the paneling back in place and returned the closet to its original state. The address on the paper would be his next move.

He closed his eyes for a second and slowly shook his head. Opening his eyes, he walked toward the entrance of the room and began down the steps. He stopped at the front door, yelling, "I need a map of London!"

A few men outside looked at each other before Bradley spoke up. "I believe I have one in my glovebox."

Moments later, Bradley was driving Sully in a 1938 Wolseley Series III police car across London toward Holston Street. As they drove through central London, several streets were blocked off due to debris from German bombings. The

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raids had become a nightly occurrence for nearly two weeks now, and the British people, though scared, regarded it as a new part of their daily life. Police and ordinary citizens would band together to search through the rubble and coordinate cleanup after the bombs fell. Fires raged across London at night, and the brigades were stretched so thin that they welcomed the extra help. Many of the more seasoned brigades' men had been called away to the war effort, so it was not uncommon to find women and children on the fire line.

Bradley turned the police car onto Oxford Street only three kilometers from Holston Road. Sully looked out the window at Londoners going about their daily routine. Parts of the city looked like peacetime rather than wartime. He enjoyed living in London and admired the British resiliency with the Third Reich knocking on their door. They still managed afternoon tea and a somewhat normal routine while constantly surrounded by talk of the war. Plus, the nightly bombings were terrifying. The sirens would wail while most Londoners gathered their families in the safety of The Underground, the city's subway system.

Bradley turned onto Holston road and parked near the entrance to the street. They sat for a minute as Sully surveyed the area.

"What is it, sir?" Bradley said, breaking the silence.

"Not sure; an uneasy feeling," Sully said as he looked around. He reached down to his ankle and pulled a small caliber pistol from its holster.

"You better take this," he said, handing it to Bradley.

"I am not allowed to carry that, sir."

"You are today," Sully replied as Bradley took the weapon. "Only use it if you have to. Don't shoot yourself and definitely don't shoot me."

Policemen in London did not carry weapons, but Sully had received special permission to carry a gun. He would not do his job without one. For now, he kept his weapon holstered, but he was a quick draw if needed. He trusted Bradley would do the same.

Sully and Bradley walked slowly up Holston Road and carefully scanned the area, eventually arriving at the column marked 24. The two-story flat was non-descript; red brick, old and chipped, blended in with the rest of the block. There were no signs of disturbance and all the windows were obscured by curtains. As the two men waited at the entrance to the property, they noticed a man walking down the other side of the street with a case in hand. Sully walked toward him. "Excuse me," he said.

"Yes?" The man spoke warmly in a thick, British accent.

"Do you know who lives across the street in number 24?" Sully motioned to the flat across the way.

"I don't think anyone does," the man replied. "An older woman lived there a while, but she passed several years ago. She had a son, but I have not seen him around. Is there something I can help you with?"

"No, thank you," Sully replied. "I am from the Wartime Real Estate Office and we are trying to account for the number of civilians still in London. We were told there was someone living here, but I guess we were misinformed. Happens all the time, thank you, sir."

The man watched for a moment as Sully walked back across the street toward number 24.

Upon arrival, Bradley pointed Sully's attention to a black truck parked across the street at the other end of the block. Sully crossed again and approached it. "Thompson Chimney Sweeps" was written on the side, and it was empty and unlocked. Sully opened the side door and looked inside: nothing. He briefly checked the truck bed: empty.

He walked quickly back to number 24 and started down the path to the front door, Bradley following close behind. When Sully stepped on a stick, cracking it in half, Bradley nearly had a heart attack. Then, when they reached the front door, Sully checked for any wires; he was most worried about a bomb in the house. He took every precaution, as he did not plan on blowing up today. Satisfied there were no booby traps, he knocked loudly on the door and looked over at Bradley as

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silence emanated from the house. A visibly nervous Bradley tried his best to appear calm.

“Exciting, isn’t it?” Sully said with a slight grin.

“Yes, sir,” Bradley responded with a less than convincing nod. “What do you expect to find?”

“I don’t know, but let’s find out.”

Sully reached for the front doorknob and turned it. The knob clicked, and as he glanced at Bradley with a slight look of surprise, he removed his pistol and slowly opened the door to look in. The house was empty, musty, and dirty. It looked and smelled as if no one had been there in a long time. He pushed the door open until it bumped against the wall and stepped inside, followed closely by Bradley.

The smell of “old” dominated the room, as the windows in this place had not been opened for a long time. The carpet was filthy, the curtains were dusty, and the plaster had cracked and faded.

“I guess the cleaning service was off this week,” Sully said as he scanned the room.

“I don’t think there ever was a cleaning service,” Bradley said seriously, eliciting a slight nod and grin from Sully.

“Let’s search the first floor, carefully,” Sully said.

Bradley nodded and headed for the hallway to the left, holding his pistol. Sully moved straight ahead into the dining area, where an old glass light hung in the center of the room. He ducked around it and reached the kitchen, where he wiped his finger across the counter, picking up a thick layer of dust. Looking out the back door, he could see overgrown grass and an old, rusted bike leaning against the shed. He opened the kitchen cabinet above the sink, but the door hinge broke, leaving the cabinet door hanging awkwardly. Sully opened the other cabinets to find a few plates and a lone teacup.

Bradley entered the kitchen as Sully turned around. “Nothing. Completely empty,” Bradley said.

Sully nodded. “Same here, it seems. Let’s try upstairs.” Sully glanced around the room, a look of curiosity on his face. Though there was nothing in the house, he did not like this

feeling. He felt he was being watched, even though no one was there.

Bradley again followed Sully as they walked upstairs to the landing. A large crack in the plaster moved unevenly up the wall. A few pieces fell onto the stairs as Sully ran his fingers across it. They reached the first bedroom and stopped at the entrance for a moment. Bradley entered, walked around the small room, and came back to the doorway, shaking his head. “Nothing,” he said as he looked at Sully.

They walked together toward the end of the hallway, where Sully walked inside the master bedroom. There was a small wooden box in the middle of the floor. He knelt to inspect it, admiring the old wood, and noticed two small hinges on its back. Some inlaid wood on the top was obscured by a layer of dust. It looked like an old jewelry box. Feeling somewhat certain it was safe, Sully picked it up and wiped the dust off the top, exposing an inlaid symbol of a skull dripping blood. Still crouched down, Sully opened the box and removed a folded piece of paper. He placed the box back on the floor and unfolded it. Written in the same text as the bloody paper from the other location, he recognized the calling card: *Totenkopf*.

Sully looked up at Bradley. “We need to get out of here, immediately,” he said as he grabbed the box. Suddenly, the sound of glass shattering enveloped the room as a bullet raced right over Sully’s head. He hit the ground, but a second bullet struck Bradley in the arm as he dove on the floor. Sully crawled over to the shattered window, cutting his hands on shards of glass, as Bradley rolled over and propped himself against a stone wall out of view. Sully glanced out the corner of the window and noticed a person on the terra cotta roof across the street packing up a rifle. He recognized him as the man he had just spoken to on the street.

“You okay?” Sully yelled to Bradley.

“I don’t know, sir; I’ve never been shot,” Bradley replied as he put pressure on the wound with his left hand.

Sully crawled over to him for a look. “You’ll be fine. Just

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keep pressure on it.”

Bradley watched as Sully darted from the room. He ran down the hallway, down the stairs, and out the front door. He raced across the street and kicked in the door to the flat. The door jamb splintered with the force of Sully’s boot as the door slammed against the wall, revealing a sparsely furnished flat.

Sully ran inside and up the stairs to the second floor, weapon drawn. The door to the attic stairs was open, so, after a quick glance, Sully climbed up and walked across the empty attic to an open window providing access to the roof. He stepped outside to see the gunman running across the adjoining roof, carrying a black leather case. Sully ran across the roof, stumbling on the uneven tiles. He fired a shot but missed as the gunman stumbled. Regaining his balance, the gunman ran toward the edge of the roof, tossed his case over the edge, and jumped. Sully fired again as the man disappeared over the roofline, his bullet ricocheting off and shattering the ceramic roof tiles in every direction.

Sully slowed down as he approached the end of the roof. Not knowing what was over the edge, he lay on his stomach and inched his way up to look over. When he raised his head, the tile in front of him exploded into pieces as a bullet blew it apart. Sully rolled over and grabbed his face. The jagged pieces of terra cotta had cut the skin under his right eye. Squinting, he wiped some blood from his face. “Dammit,” he huffed, blindly firing two shots over the edge. The gunman had jumped onto a lower roof and was perched with his rifle aimed directly at Sully.

Sully rolled over and thought for a moment as he caught his breath. He exhaled and grabbed a piece of roof tile. Moving it side to side, he dislodged it and slid down the roof a bit to another spot farther down. He cocked his pistol, threw the tile far over the edge from where he was lying, and waited for the impact. The tile hit the lower roof and broke apart with the sound of several plates hitting a kitchen floor. Sully looked over the edge; the distraction had given him the opportunity he had hoped for. The gunman glanced over at the area where the

tile exploded, so Sully fired two shots, one hitting the cement wall behind, the other striking the gunman. He fell over onto his back and grabbed his right side, clearly wincing. He tried to raise his rifle, but Sully fired first, striking the man in the chest. He crumpled over as blood pooled and ran down the roof tiles.

Sully jumped down and kicked the rifle away. He leaned over the bleeding gunman, now barely hanging on. Sully applied pressure to the wound; he did not want the man to die. He wanted to question him, but the blood was pooling everywhere. The man began to choke as saliva and blood began gathering at his mouth, his chest convulsing. The man briefly opened his eyes and, with a bloody smile, bit down on something with his teeth. Sully shook the man and yelled, "No! Dammit!"

He knew there was no use; he had seen this happen before. The man had broken the pill in his mouth to poison himself, rendering him brain dead within a few seconds. Sully had been briefed on these pills, which were sometimes obscured as false teeth.

He let go of the gunman and rolled over onto his back. His face and hands were bleeding and his knee hurt after jumping from rooftop to rooftop. The man lay motionless next to him, his eyes still open as saliva bubbled around his mouth and pooled down, mixing with blood on his chest. Pushing himself up, Sully stood over the body. He had to go check on Bradley.

After climbing back through the window, Sully found that Bradley had made his way downstairs, still bleeding, but in decent shape. Bradley had crossed the street and used the call box to phone for medical help; they were on their way.

The medical team arrived with a few more officers, who quickly cordoned off the house. This was clearly an ambush; they had been lured here by the notes in John Cleary's file. Neighbors reported a man and a woman at the previous address, but Sully had only encountered the man; the woman was still out there. He grabbed a few officers to help him

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continue searching the place while Bradley tended to his wound. They spread out and began rifling through drawers, under furniture, and under cushions.

Sully went back upstairs to search the bedrooms. The first bedroom had barely anything in it. He opened the closet to find a few pieces of clothing. Tossing them aside, he checked the walls and shelving for any abnormalities: nothing. He then ventured back up to the attic to find some old trunks filled with clothes and empty boxes.

Sully was startled by a voice from downstairs, belonging to one of the medical professionals. He summoned them upstairs to the attic. They wanted to collect the body from the roof, but Sully wanted the body brought to the living room so he could thoroughly examine it. They nodded in agreement as two men with a folding cloth stretcher carefully climbed out the window.

Convinced the attic was clear, Sully returned to the living room to join the other men; no one had found anything substantial. Bradley was to be taken to the hospital to have the bullet removed. Sully thanked him for his bravery and assured him they would figure this out.

“I’m sorry, sir, for getting shot,” Bradley said.

Sully smiled slightly. “You did great, Charlie. Hopefully this will be the only time.”

After Bradley left, Sully went through the kitchen, stopping at a latched door. He unlocked the latch and slowly opened it. A light switch on the wall to the right was barely visible in the dark, but the first thing he noticed was a staircase leading straight down and a stench wafting up from below.

Sully fetched a flashlight from one of the others and headed down to the basement. He removed a handkerchief and covered his nose as he reached the bottom. The light flickered as he turned to see a body tied to a wooden chair. The man was dead and beginning to rot, flies circling his corpse. The man was in his late-fifties, Sully guessed, and probably the homeowner. He had been killed by a single shot to the head, execution style. The man’s head hung down as his chin rested

on his chest. There was nothing else in the basement. Sully wondered what he had stumbled upon or, more accurately, what he had been lured to. A voice above called him, so Sully turned and quickly jogged up the stairs.

The body from the roof had been delivered to the living room and was lying on the stretcher on the floor. The rifle was next to the body along with its case. Sully crouched down and asked the medical personnel for a rag. He lifted the blood-soaked jacket lapel of the man and reached into his breast pocket, searching for anything that would identify him. Coming up empty, he felt around the man's pant pockets: nothing. He rolled the body over and checked for back pockets, or something in his waistband: still nothing. He told the medical personnel that they could take the body to the morgue and informed them of the second one in the basement. He ordered two officers to accompany the bodies.

“Do not stop for anyone,” Sully told them. “If anyone asks, use my name. This is a wartime security issue and needs to be kept quiet.” The men agreed as they removed the body and left.

Sully returned to the middle of the room and picked up the rifle. Familiar with all types of weapons, he recognized it right away as a Mauser Carbine 98, the standard-issue weapon of the German infantry. This model had been modified with a silencer and was easily dismantled to fit in the case. With a range of up to four hundred yards, Sully was lucky to be alive. He wondered how a German agent was running around London with this weapon without anyone having any idea. Sully also believed this was far from over; John Cleary was on to something, and he needed to find out what.

Sully put down the rifle and moved on to the case lying next to it. He popped the two latches to find a small booklet emblazoned with a skull on the cover. Sully picked it up, pulled off the elastic strap wrapped around, and opened it. There were several pages of notes and diagrams. He thumbed through the pages, eventually arriving at one page containing a list of names. “LONDON” was written above them. He

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recognized just three.

The name at the top with a line through it was John Cleary's; the next name on the list was his. Though it had been close, no line would be drawn through "Frank Sullivan" yet. Sully assumed this was a list of people to be eliminated, but the only other name he recognized was one he had only seen twice. Two crime scenes, two murders, *Totenkopf*, and a familiar name; that's all Sully had to work from. Then he wondered to himself: *Who the hell is Mason Wright?*

2

MASON WRIGHT SAT AND WATCHED intently as Collette Moulié thumbed through recently intercepted documents detailing the ouster and imprisonment of thousands of German Jews. He would have helped, but Collette was adamant that she did not need him to. Mason knew not to argue. With everything Collette had been through lately, Mason understood why she alone would want to oversee the documents.

Mason had been in France just a few months prior, helping to smuggle out one of the world's greatest art treasures to the United States for safe keeping. He'd nearly lost his life, but it had been worth it for many reasons, including the woman now sitting across from him. Collette was the daughter of Jacques Moulié, a prominent figure in the French art world. Jacques had asked Mason, the son of his old friend Aldon Wright, to help him remove many of France's most valuable art treasures from various museums to safer locations before the German army arrived.

While Mason worked to help her father, Collette discovered and took in a 13-year-old German Jewish immigrant, Anna Dressler, who had been living on her own. Anna's family had sent her to France before the occupation to save her from being rounded up in her hometown of Saarbrücken.

Then, without warning, Collette was taken by a German Lieutenant named Johan Kliest. After being forced to play cat-and-mouse with the man, Mason was able to find and rescue Collette, even though Kliest got away. Mason thought about Kliest every day, vowing one day to get revenge.

Mason, Anna, Collette and her parents then relocated to London to help in the war effort. Jacques, having been asked by the art minister of London to consult on the safety of

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London's art treasures, was put up with his family and friends in a flat near the center of London. Jacques believed in the preservation of paintings and sculpture for public consumption, but with war engulfing all of Europe, he was quickly becoming an expert in hiding them.

Meanwhile, every time new documents regarding Jewish immigrants arrived in London, Collette searched them for any trace of Anna's family. Collette had promised Anna to do everything in her power to locate them, even though Anna was mature for her years. She had to grow up quickly after being sent alone to a foreign country where she knew no one.

German Jews were disappearing by the thousands, with some sent to hard labor camps and others imprisoned or shot for their religious affiliation. If Collette could find where Anna's family had been taken, maybe she could find a way to reunite them. Collette knew this was a long shot, but she would do everything she could.

The newest documents had only been delivered to the London War Offices in the last few days. When Mason was informed of the new batch, he and Collette immediately responded.

"Would you like some water?" Mason asked as he glanced at Collette.

"No," she said without looking up.

"I am going to get some water," he said, standing up.

Collette gave him a slight wave of her hand, shooing him away. Mason stood motionless for a second before walking to the door of the old wooden office. When Collette was this focused, he could dance around in the nude without her noticing. Even if he were to tell her he was going to jump out the window, she would have given him the same wave. She was determined, and he loved that about her.

"Oh, look, a whole garrison of German soldiers are coming down the hallway; we better run," Mason said playfully as he looked outside the office.

Collette looked up at him with her eyebrows raised. "Please leave," she said.

Mason chuckled and left the room, closing the door as quietly as an old wooden door could be. He then walked down the hall to a small table draped with a lace tablecloth; some teacups, a ceramic teapot, and a glass pitcher were arranged on top. Mason grabbed a small cup and filled it with water. He had special clearance to be in the War Offices due to his recent endeavors in France. With Jacques' help and some phone calls from Paul Ganoux, a police officer who had helped him escape France, Mason was now allowed in these hallways.

Men and women passed busily by, as phones rang throughout the building. Many of the offices were just wooden frames with windows, so Mason could see into most of them. Maps hung on walls with push pins of all colors designating troop movements and other information. Several floors beneath the building were the War Rooms, where London's command met daily with Prime Minister Winston Churchill to discuss events and plan. Mason had not received clearance to go there, but he hoped one day to be granted entrance. For now, he was just a guy hanging around the tea station.

As he watched all the back and forth, Mason thought of all the men and women who had little choice in this war. So many people had enlisted to fight, but the men and women in these hallways were just as valuable as those on the front lines. Yes, people may have simply sat at their desks, rifling through papers or talking on the phone, but everyone here was doing the impossible, trying to keep up with the flow of information to get it into the hands of the men downstairs, ultimately deciding their fate. Mason hoped that one day these people would be remembered as the ones behind the scenes helping to win the war.

It was therefore imperative to keep out of the way. Mason sipped his water and watched the chaos around him. Germany occupied most of Europe, and everyone here fully believed Hitler was coming for them next. The Germans had launched an air offensive called *Adlertag*, or "Eagle Day," in early September, and bombings were now a nightly occurrence.

Still, Mason had a contact in the information department

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who tracked down German commanders. Roger Knightsbridge was in his early-forties, wore glasses, and had a thick English accent, which Mason often had difficulty deciphering. He would constantly laugh at his own jokes, which Mason barely understood, and always walked incredibly fast from desk to desk, office to office. It was hard to keep him still, seemingly existing only on coffee and speed walking, but the man was exceptionally good at his job.

Mason walked toward the end of the hall, where Roger was standing over his desk on the phone. He abruptly placed the receiver down and turned, nearly running into Mason.

“Ah, my Yankee friend, to what do I owe the pleasure?” Roger was out of the office before Mason could answer.

“Well, come on, follow,” Roger said, waving Mason on.

Mason quickly followed Roger, who was halfway down the hallway in a split second. He disappeared into another office on the right, and when Mason reached the door, Roger was already exiting it.

“I am looking for a Lieutenant Kliest,” Mason said, blocking Roger’s way down the hallway.

Roger slipped by. “Kliest? I’m not familiar with that one, but I will look into it.”

Roger disappeared down the stairs, leaving Mason standing there. Roger may have been a walking bundle of nerves, but he was as sharp as they come; if he said he would investigate it, he would. Mason was sure of that.

Mason returned to the office where Collette was and slowly opened the door. Collette was resting her head on the table, the pile of documents in front of her. She raised and shook her head as he entered. “Nothing,” she said.

“I’m sorry,” Mason said as he closed the door. Collette stood up as he walked over and embraced her. “We’ll find them,” he whispered.

As they stood together, a commotion erupted in the hallway, just before British soldiers came into the room. “Can we please see your identity cards?”

Mason backed up a few steps and reached into his pocket

for his identification. He handed it to the soldier, who glanced at it. Satisfied, he returned it to Mason and turned to Collette.

“I am with him as his guest,” she said.

“I still need some identification,” the soldier said politely.

“What is this about?” Mason interjected.

“I am not at liberty to say, but I do need to see her identification,” the soldier replied.

Collette handed over her identification. The soldier gave it to his partner, who checked it against a list of names on a clipboard. He reached the bottom of the first page and flipped to the next. He located her name as an authorized guest of Mason Wright and returned her identification.

“We apologize for any inconvenience,” the man said.

Mason was amused at the politeness of these two men carrying out a profoundly serious task. He loved the British.

Mason and Collette left the office and headed down the hallway toward the stairwell. The normally chaotic scene was even more so than usual. Soldiers were stationed throughout the building, and security was heightened. As Mason and Collette reached the front door, two men entered the building. Mason and Collette stepped aside as one man quickly ushered the other toward the elevator.

“Sully, over here,” Mason overheard him say as the elevator doors opened. The two men then disappeared inside. It was obvious something had happened, so Mason decided it best he and Collette leave for the day.

Mason and Collette stepped onto the London streets for their short walk to the flat. The cool autumn day was refreshing to Mason, as he was used to New York City weather. Collette was not as enamored with the gray skies and stiff breeze that made it feel colder than the temperature indicated. She pulled her scarf tight as they turned the corner near Parliament Square. Big Ben, the 315 foot clock tower completed in 1859, rang out, signaling 4 o'clock.

Mason stopped to look up. “One of the greatest landmarks in the world,” he said.

“It is beautiful,” Collette said as she moved in closer to

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keep warm.

“Did you know that Big Ben is actually the name of the bell and not the tower?” Mason said.

“Yes, I knew that,” Collette said as they stared up.

“You did?” Mason said sarcastically.

“Yes, and did you know that it weighs thirteen and a half tons? Or, that it is named after Benjamin Shaw, who oversaw its installation?” Collette looked at him with a smile, raising her eyebrows.

“Of course, everyone knows that.”

“You, Mason Wright, are a liar.”

“Okay, you’re right, I did not know that, but I am impressed you do.”

“As you should be,” she said as she glanced next to her at the plaque listing all the facts about the tower.

Neither one of them noticed the glamorous woman lurking behind them. She wore a long, grey, wool coat, a colorful scarf around her neck, and large sunglasses. When Mason and Collette stopped, she did as well, pretending to admire the sights.

“I am cold. Let’s go,” Collette said, grabbing Mason’s arm.

They continued past Westminster Abbey, a young couple in love during wartime. Access to many landmarks had been restricted due to the war, but Westminster Abbey still held services and allowed people inside to pray.

“Do you really think we can find Anna’s family?” Collette asked Mason as they walked.

“I don’t know, but we will do everything we can,” Mason said. “Also, finding them is one thing; getting them out of Europe would be another.”

“Anna deserves to know what happened to them.”

“I agree, but we can’t tell her information we don’t have. If I could find Kliest, I could make him find them for us.”

“Oh yeah, how would you do that? With all your wit and charm? You need to forget about him; I am sure he has forgotten about you.”

“I can’t forget about him after what he did to you. And, yes, my wit and charm would go a long way, especially with a gun to his head.”

They turned onto the century-old cobblestones of Saint James Street, a few blocks from their flat. The woman behind them looked around; there was no one else on the block. She walked more quickly to close in on them, unbuttoning her coat and raising a pistol toward the back of Mason’s head. She failed to notice two men exiting the building she was passing.

A voice screamed out, “Gun!” One of the men grabbed for her arm just as she fired. The bullet hit the taillight of a car right next to Mason and Collette, startling both of them. The other man exiting the building grabbed his friend and the woman as she tried to fire again, tackling them both to the ground. Mason ushered Collette into the vestibule of a nearby building and removed his Colt from his waistband. He looked around the corner to see three people tussling on the ground. Another shot rang out as one of the men rolled off into the street, blood staining his shirt. The other man continued wrestling with the woman, who was surprisingly strong for her small stature. Mason ran over and put the barrel of his gun to the woman’s temple. “Let go, or you will die.”

She looked up at him and released her gun. The man grabbed it, quickly moved away, and slowly got to his feet. Mason kept his aim on the woman, who smiled a little at him.

“Mason Wright, you should be dead right now.”

Mason looked back at her. “I guess it wasn’t my time,” he said coldly. “How do you know my name?”

“I know a lot about you.”

“Who are you?” Mason said, losing patience.

“No one. I am just following orders.”

“Whose?”

She smiled at Mason.

“Whose orders?” Mason firmly pushed the gun barrel to her head.

“An old friend of yours. Johan Kliest. He wants you dead.”

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With that she smiled and bit down on the capsule. She started to shake, saliva pouring from her mouth. She slumped backwards on the pavement, dying instantly.

Collette came running over. "Oh my God. Who is she?"

"I don't know," Mason said as he took a deep breath, choosing not to tell Collette what the woman had said.

Mason's blood began to boil as sirens started to ring in the distance. He thanked the man who had helped him and tried to help the other, but he was in dire shape when the ambulance arrived, and probably would not make it.

Mason and Collette were not safe anymore. While they relayed most of their story to the constable, Mason left out the woman's final words. Kliest obviously had not forgotten about him.

ACROSS LONDON, WORD OF THE ATTEMPTED murder reached Frank Sullivan.

"We found Mason Wright and have his information," Gordon said.

"That was quick," Sully said to his assistant. "How did we find him?"

"Someone tried to put a bullet in his head as he walked down Saint James Street."

Sully dropped his pen and looked up from his desk. "Tried?"

"Yes, she was interrupted as she pulled the trigger."

"She? Let me guess: a woman in glamorous clothes?"

"I'm not sure about the clothes, but it could be the woman you are looking for."

"Do we have her?"

"No, she bit down on a pill."

Sully looked down. "I want you to keep this quiet, Gordon. I need to have a chat with Mason Wright."

Gordon nodded and left Sully to lean back in his chair. This day was getting more interesting and dangerous by the minute.

3

MASON SAT ON THE COUCH in the living room of their London flat as rain pattered against the window outside. He and Collette were back home after the attempt on his life, and she was peppering him with questions for which he had no answers. She was not buying his explanation but telling her what the woman had said to him would just upset her more. Collette's parents were also understandably concerned, with Jacques especially worried they were being targeted for their prior activities in France.

Collette looked out the rain-soaked window, her head resting on Mason's shoulder as he tried to read the newspaper. Anna entered the room and sat next to them. Collette reached out with her right arm and pulled her closer. She looked at Collette with a mischievous grin.

"What are you up to?" Collette said with a smile.

Mason leaned over and chimed in. "What's going on?"

"I think you two should get married," Anna said cheerfully.

"Excuse me?" Collette exclaimed.

"Then we could have a big wedding and get all dressed up," Anna said, beaming with excitement.

Collette looked to Mason and back at Anna. "That is a genuinely nice thought, sweetie, but I don't think I like him enough to spend every day with him. He's a lot of work," Collette said as she winked at Anna.

Mason stood up and looked at the two of them. "I am a great catch!" he shouted. "Smart, good looking, funny, charming, did I mention good looking?"

"Yes, and don't forget humble," Collette said as she looked up at him.

"Plenty of women would jump at the chance," Mason muttered.

“Is that right?” Collette furrowed her brows.

“Yep, plenty.”

Collette shook her head and looked at Anna. “He has a rather large ego,” she said.

Anna laughed as Mason and Collette continued their sarcastic jabs back and forth.

They were interrupted by a knock on the door. “I’ll get it!” Jacques shouted from the kitchen.

Collette turned serious as she looked at Mason. He gestured calmly toward her and headed toward the front door. Jacques met him in the hallway. “A man dropped this note off for you,” he said.

Mason looked up. “Who was it?”

“I don’t know, he didn’t say. I believe he was just a courier.”

Mason opened the note:

Mason Wright,

My name is Joseph Collins. I would like to speak with you about your request for information from the personnel office. Kindly meet me at 23 Blanchard Street today at 4 p.m. to discuss further.

*Regards,
Joseph*

Mason looked up at Jacques and handed him the note.

“Do you know a Joseph Collins?” Jacques asked as he studied the note.

“No,” Mason said, shaking his head. “With everything that has happened, let’s not share this with Collette until we figure out who this is and what he wants.”

Jacques agreed before they both returned to the living room.

“Who was at the door?” Collette asked the second Mason returned.

“A gentleman from the personnel office,” Mason said. “They have a question about my request for information.”

Mason sat down next to Collette and resumed reading *The Daily Mail*. Collette looked at him. "I didn't know you applied for additional information," she said.

Mason locked eyes with Jacques, sitting silently nearby.

"It's part of the process," Mason said. "I'm sure it's nothing. I just thought it could benefit our search. I thought I told you?" Mason lied through his teeth. He, too, was curious about the note, since he had not applied for higher clearance.

"No, you did not," Collette said suspiciously.

Mason shifted uncomfortably as Collette looked at him.

"It's nothing. Just routine," Mason maintained.

"Nothing is routine these days."

"It's a formality. Nothing more."

"You sure?"

"I'm sure."

Mason retired shortly after their exchange to the bedroom to gather his thoughts. Collette was not far behind. Mason couldn't escape her.

"What is this really about?" Collette demanded.

Mason sighed. "I don't know. Someone named Joseph Collins. I never heard of him, but I am going to meet him today. He needs to talk to me about something. He claims to be from the personnel office."

"Do you think it has anything to do with Anna's family?"

"I don't think so. He wanted to speak only with me and said it was urgent." Mason handed Collette the note. "I think it has something to do with what happened earlier. Something was going on over at the offices when we left."

"You're going to be careful, right?" Collette raised her eyebrow.

"I'm always careful," Mason said, moving closer.

"That's what I'm afraid of. You, always being careful, always attracting trouble."

Mason leaned in, kissed her, and embraced her as she buried her head in his chest. "I'll be fine," he whispered before kissing the top of her head. He wondered if that was the truth.

A few hours later, Mason put on a hat, zipped his jacket, and grabbed an umbrella, not only for the light rain, but also because he liked the idea of being able to cover his face. Collette kissed him. “Be careful,” she said softly. Mason nodded and left the apartment. Jacques was waiting in the hallway.

“Do you have your pistol?” he asked with a serious look.

“Yes, I do,” Mason said. “Try to keep Collette busy with Anna so she doesn’t worry.”

“I’ll try,” Jacques said with a smirk. “Won’t be easy. After everything you two have been through, she won’t relax until you come back through that door.”

They shook hands before Mason walked down the stairwell. When he reached the front door, he stepped out onto the front steps and opened his umbrella. After looking both directions, he descended the steps into the grey afternoon.

Mason had roughly twenty-five minutes to get to Suffolk Street, but his plan was to arrive a few minutes late. He also wanted to watch the building for ten minutes before entering, to see if anyone was hanging around. Mason therefore stopped on Hanover Place near the National Gallery, a fifteen-minute walk from the Blanchard building. He walked along Hanover until he reached Floral Street, turned right, and walked past the famous façade of the Royal Opera House. He briefly admired the six large stone columns out front before continuing past the glass front of Floral Hall next door. He then stopped for a moment to check his surroundings.

Mason had been tracked and followed so many times in the past few months that he was getting quite good at making sure he was walking alone. Crossing the street to the other side, he stopped at a bill post. He read some of the advertisements and propaganda posters, which reminded Londoners to always be on the lookout for suspicious activity. “Remember, Loose Talk Can Cost Lives,” read one poster; a large red one next to it read, “Keep Calm and Carry On.” *What a British sentiment*, thought Mason.

After a minute or two he crossed the street, walked to the

corner of Floral and Rose Streets, crossed over once more, and turned left on Garrick Street. He paused to tie his bootlace while glancing behind him. There were several Londoners walking about, but no one in particular caught Mason's eye. He then turned onto Saint Martin's Lane and approached its intersection with Trafalgar Square.

The square, commemorating the battle of Trafalgar during the Napoleonic wars, had been a gathering place in Central London since the late 1800's. Nelson's Column, its center stone monument, towered over the square at 169 feet tall, while four lions guarded its base. Mason approached from the west, but the square was not as busy as normal, with both soldiers and sandbags surrounding the lions at the column's base, some looking no older than sixteen. Mason passed through the square, constantly changing direction to watch his back.

Finally, Mason reached Suffolk Street and turned right. The Blanchard building was across the street. He found a tree to lean on for a few minutes while watching the entrance. A van was making a delivery just past the building and the courier could be seen unloading boxes. Still, Mason watched this delivery man with interest, slightly skeptical of his true intentions. Then, as Mason approached the building, another man appeared and bumped into him.

"Pardon me," the gentleman said before continuing on. Mason turned and watched the man walk away, briefly checking his person to make sure he had not been stabbed or injured. He shook his head, approached the buzzers, and pressed the one marked number 23. A voice responded. "Yes?"

"Mason Wright for Mr. Collins."

"Check your coat pocket," the voice replied.

"I'm sorry?" Mason was a bit confused, but his comment was met with silence.

Mason rifled around in his pocket to find a slip of paper. It read: *Blue Bridge, St. James Park, 4:30.*

Mason quickly looked up and down the street for the man who had bumped into him, but he was gone.

Saint James Park was a few blocks away, but having never been to the famous park himself, Mason felt a bit more exposed than he was comfortable with as he walked toward it. Approaching the entrance on Horse Yards Road, he noticed a few men sitting on a bench. Mason felt it better to avoid any more contact with people, so he hopped a small fence and headed into the park across the lawn. He could see a lake ahead as he slowly walked behind some trees. The Blue Bridge, which crossed the lake at its midpoint, was in his mind the perfect spot to be ambushed, so he was going to be incredibly careful.

Mason noticed a man in a tan overcoat at one end of the bridge, standing and leaning while reading a newspaper. While slowly approaching the south end of the bridge, he watched as the man suddenly folded his paper, looked across the bridge at him, and walked briskly away. Sensing something was not right, Mason turned to walk away when a man grabbed him by the arm and whispered, "Keep walking, Mason. We're not safe here."

Mason, never one to take orders from strangers, pushed the man away with his arm until he felt the barrel of a gun in his side.

Once again, the man told Mason, "Keep walking."

Mason did not recognize the man's voice, but it was clear he was not British. He sounded American.

"Who are you?" Mason said coldly.

"I just want to talk, but we can't do it here. I need you to answer some questions."

Mason, glancing at the man who was looking straight ahead, thought of Collette's words: "Be careful." He had thought he was, but now he was being led by a stranger through a park with a gun pushed into his side. Still, to everyone else, they simply appeared to be silently walking together during a rainy London afternoon.

The man led Mason out of Saint James Park, toward Knightsbridge Road, and south along Hyde Park. There was something familiar about this man, but Mason could not place

it. When they finally reached The Burning Kettle Pub, the man let go to open the wood and glass door beneath a sign depicting a large, wrought iron kettle in a stone fireplace. The few barely audible people at the bar paid no attention to the two men as they walked across the wooden planked floor to a table in the back, near the crackling fireplace. The smell of an open fire filled the air, mixing with that of a near empty pub. They found a small, round table, where Mason shook out his umbrella before sitting down. His chair wobbled, so he switched it with one from the next table, while his captor watched his every move. When the barkeep came over, the man ordered two ales that were promptly delivered moments later.

Mason took a sip and broke the ice. “Mr. Collins, do you always kidnap strangers and take them out for ale?”

The man quietly leaned in. “You’re American?”

“Yes, New York. You?” Mason stared across the table.

“How long have you been in London?” the man asked.

“I relocated here during the Crusades in the eleventh century,” Mason smirked. “I’m actually a Templar Knight.”

The man was not amused; Mason relented. “A couple of months ago, I relocated here with my beloved’s family to help with the war effort.”

“And what, exactly, do you do for the war effort?” The man sipped and stared at Mason with his eyebrows raised.

“Whatever I can,” Mason answered coldly.

“Can you be a bit more specific?”

“No, I can’t,” Mason said. “Forgive me, Mr. Collins, or whoever you are, I received a note out of the blue requesting a meeting I know nothing about with someone I’ve never met. I followed directions to a park, where I was taken by gunpoint to a local pub for ale. I appreciate it, I do, but I need to tell you, it is a strange way to make friends. Either tell me what is going on or I am leaving. Shoot me if you must, but I have better things to do with my time.”

“I don’t think you do, Mason.” The man’s serious response held Mason’s attention.