

CHAPTER 7

NAPLES, ITALY | MAY 1944

The morning after arriving in Gibraltar, Fiona Marchand boarded a British Royal Air Force Douglas C-47 military transport. The same airframe as the Swissair Douglas DC-3 she flew from Switzerland but decidedly different inside. Seating in the military C-47 version consisted of facing rows on each side rather than the commercial forward facing seats. Fitted to carry troops in full battle gear or parachutes, the C-47 was a utilitarian transport designed for maximizing cargo.

Dressed as a photojournalist, the presence of an attractive woman nonetheless created a stir among the British soldiers. Her outfit consisted of cotton twill trousers, a shirt with pockets over the breasts, a leather flight jacket, and lace-up boots. A working outfit whether gaining intelligence or working in her cover in the Vatican Museum.

Seated next to the ranking officer, a captain in his early twenties, she endeavored to be polite to his endless small talk and flirtation. With a camera borrowed from Marc slung around her neck, she played her alternate cover story to account for entering an active war zone. Looking at the faces of these young soldiers soon to face combat made her anxieties seem trivial. The Germans continued to mount stiff resistance holding a line south of Rome. Allied casualties mounted daily.

Several hours flying over the Mediterranean offered time to reflect on what she was doing. An intelligence operative? Com-

ing from the academic and museum world, an alien venture. Yet no less unusual than adapting to occupation life under the despised *Boche*.

Deprived of everything that meant being French while living in constant fear. A fear realized with the arrest of her younger brother only to disappear into some Nazi concentration camp. Her work with Marc in the Resistance restored meaning to life turned upside down by providing an active means to fight the Nazis. It also uncovered skills she never imagined. Times were different and so was she.

She stepped off the airplane at the damaged Naples Airport and walked briskly with confidence toward what appeared to be the former passenger terminal. Every soldier on this fight came from some normal background. Her circumstances no more unlikely than everyone fighting this war.

Inside the building was chaos with a cacophony of shouting voices. Recognizing officers from the enlisted ranks, she entered a line of several officers queued in front of another officer seated behind a table. Taking a place in the line, a young lieutenant ahead of her turned around registering surprise followed by a wide grin.

"Bloody marvelous seeing a pretty woman here. Lieutenant Nathan Carter, Ma'am."

Dressed in full battle dress, Lt. Carter snapped to attention, clicking his heels and giving Marchand a smart British open-palmed salute.

"I am a journalist," Marchand said in her French accented English extending her hand.

The officers were reporting in to receive deployment instructions for their units. The harried officer at the desk with his head down thumbing through paperwork said, "Next?"

Marchand passed her orders to him.

Looking up, the officer said, "Bloody hell! Who are you?"

"Marchand, Fiona. A journalist. I am to report to U.S. Fifth Army headquarters. Perhaps you can direct me where to go?"

"This is a war zone, Miss, not a bloody information service."

Looking at his nametag, Marchand said, "Lieutenant Mallo-ry. If you look at my orders, they are quite specific. Note those

HUNTING ODESSA

orders are from Allied Headquarters. Render all services. I would think information falls within *services*. You will note the signature of a major general.

Somewhat cowed, "Yes, Ma'am. Give me a few minutes and I will see what I can do."

Standing off to the side to wait, she looked around. As the only woman in the area, all the soldiers passing through the processing center looked her over with varying degrees of intensity from curiosity to obvious lust.

A burly American soldier with chevrons on his shoulder denoting him as a senior sergeant approached.

"The limey officer over there tells me I'm to take you to American headquarters. This your only baggage?"

"Yes, Sergeant. Thank you."

The soldier picked up her standard issue American Army duffle bag. "Right this way. I have a jeep outside. Wind might mess up your hair."

"I will manage."

"A photographer, huh? What's a pretty lady doing out here with a bunch of unwashed grunts with bullets flying?"

"Doing my job to get pictures. Been around enough, Sergeant. Seen lots of shooting and a whole lot worse in Spain during the civil war. Used to the hardships."

Playing her cover to the hilt. Building on Marc's recounting of events in Spain, she would play her cover role patterned on the real life photojournalist Gerda Taro.

As the Sergeant drove through Naples, the devastation from Allied bombing was a jarring site viewed close up as the jeep weaved its way avoiding debris. Both the U.S. Fifth Army and the British Eighth Army made their joint headquarters in a municipal building. After passing the undamaged Cattedrale di Santa Maria Assunta, her cover destination, military headquarters was conveniently close. She suspected her time to split between the two locations depending on how circumstances developed.

The building was another hectic hive of activity. Eventually she located the office of the Executive officer of the Fifth Army Military Intelligence Section.

A repeat of the incredulous reception at the airport.

"My name is Marchand. Here are my orders," she announced to the officer standing behind a desk while handing him her orders.

After quickly reading the orders, he said, "Please be seated, Miss Marchand." Raising an eyebrow in a questioning manner, "A bit unusual the OSS sending a woman here?"

"Probably because of my qualifications, Major."

After a short silence realizing she was not going to elaborate, "Well, we shall do our best to accommodate you. I will need to consult with my boss the colonel. He will return probably by tomorrow."

"Time is short, Major. Are you in contact with any Italian partisans?"

"I am afraid I am not at liberty to discuss sensitive intelligence matters with nonmilitary personnel."

"Read my orders again, Major. They are quite explicit. No mention of first clearing anything with your colonel. Note the rank of the officer signing my orders."

The major stiffened at Marchand's rebuke. "Let me explain our situation. In this campaign, we are sharing intelligence operations with the British. Separating functions, liaison with Italian partisans falls to the Brits. I suggest the quickest way for you to embark on your mission is to start with them. This building houses the joint command headquarters for the American and British Armies."

"Very well. Whom do I see?"

"My counterpart in the British Eighth Army." Shouting through the open door, "Sergeant!"

As a sergeant entered, "Please escort Miss Marchand to Major Rothschild of British Army intelligence."

"One other matter, Major. I will need to periodically transmit encrypted messages to my headquarters."

With an exasperated expression, "Sergeant, also introduce Miss Marchand to Communications."

As she accompanied the sergeant, who carried her duffle bag, he said, "You a reporter, Ma'am?"

"Among other things."

HUNTING ODESSA

"Sure is a treat to see a pretty woman after all these months. No offense, Ma'am."

Marchand smiled. "Difficult circumstances for all of us involved in this fight."

After visiting the communications center, the sergeant led her to the other wing of the former municipal building keeping up small talk trying his best at flirtation.

"Where are you staying? I'd be glad to escort you to your assigned billet."

"Thank you. However, I will be staying at the cathedral rectory. A guest of the Church. Not far from here I understand."



Marchand's welcome at British Army Intelligence proved more amenable. Major Edmund Leopold de Rothschild was a handsome man a few years younger than she was. Every bit the English gentleman in appearance and demeanor.

His office appeared better ordered and his staff less harried than the Americans.

After introductions and recounting why she turned up in his office, Rothschild offered her tea.

"Interesting assignment. Done this sort thing before, Miss Marchand?"

"Yes. I worked in the French Resistance with my husband for several years. We made our escape to Switzerland when circumstances turned out badly. One step ahead of the *Gestapo*. My husband is American. We naturally joined the OSS working out of Bern."

"Impressive. I would also add courageous for wanting to continue the fight. You could have remained in comfort in Switzerland. What is your cover?"

"I am an art expert in real life. Employed at the Louvre for many years. Worked on restorations at the Uffizi in Florence, the Vatican Museum, and the Museo di Capodimonte here in Naples. That is how I speak Italian. Vatican Intelligence is expecting me once Rome is liberated. Depending on circumstances,

I also pass myself off as a photojournalist imbedded with the army.”

“Now to your mission making contact with Italian partisans. My counterpart at American Army Intelligence was correct. We have the principal assignment to liaison with the local partisans for actionable intelligence.”

“Well I will not be stepping on your toes. My mission is to gather broader information. Assess the political environment in Italy once Germany is defeated.”

Rothschild chuckled. “A tall order. Not sure anyone can gauge what a post-Italy might look like. They have been under Fascist rule for twenty years. Now a return to a constitutional monarchy for the liberated south following the surrender. However, the Communists and Socialists have broad support among the population. My guess is post-Italy will experience continued political turmoil.

“The politics range across the entire spectrum. I can say that because of the character of the many different partisan groups. While the Communists and Socialist represent the largest fighting factions, the resistance movement is by no means cohesive.”

She replied, “To be expected. It is the same in France. So how do you characterize the principal Italian groups?”

“Still evolving. Started right here in Naples back in September when Italy surrendered and the Germans invaded in mass. A bloody popular rebellion. Elsewhere, outlawed political groups organized. Initially, most of those willing to take up arms against the Germans were former soldiers of the Italian Army. As other committed anti-Fascists joined the resistance movement, the various groups took on the political affiliations of their members.”

“How would you characterize the politics?”

“Oh, decidedly far left. Communist and socialist mostly. The only real centrists are the Christian Democrats. Most of these politically centered groups support a unified central organization the *Comitato di Liberazione Nazionale*, the CLN. Outside that umbrella are groups comprised largely of former soldiers with less political orientation. The most effective is the *1st Gruppo Divisioni*

HUNTING ODESSA

Alpine. Former Italian elite troops operating in the Piedmont region in the north."

"What groups are operating just behind the German defensive line south of Rome?"

"Several. In Rome and the central mountain areas. Moving ahead as our forces move north. Particularly helpful to us British as we pushed north up the east side of the Italian peninsula. We then joined the Americans coming up the west side of the Italian peninsula to concentrate forces directly through the Liri Valley to breakthrough to Rome. The partisans are still important for intelligence and harassing the Germans.

"There is one group particularly helpful operating from Rome. Called the Central GAP Carlo Pisacane. Our contact is their deputy commander. A woman. A rarity among armed partisans. Carla Capponi however, is no stranger to weapons and killing Germans. She periodically slips through German lines to provide valuable tactical intelligence on what is going on in Rome."

"How can I connect with her?"

"For that you will need to consult with my fellow intelligence officer Captain Trakonitz. He largely operates in the field. I expect his return tomorrow afternoon. May I suggest you join us for dinner? I know a functioning trattoria. A few of us go there and donate the food. We get good Italian pasta and local wine while contributing to the economic recovery of Italy."

"Most kind, Major. I would like that. May I ask you a personal question?"

With a puzzled expression, he said, "Certainly."

"Are you related to the Rothschild banking dynasty?"

"Yes I am. In fact, I worked at the family bank in London before the war."

Marchand smiled. "The reason I asked, my husband's mother was a Rothschild. The French branch. Marc said his maternal great grandfather was James Mayer de Rothschild."

"Good lord! What an astonishing coincidence. My paternal great grandfather was Nathan Mayer Rothschild. The English branch of the family. James was his brother. That means we share common great-great-grandparents. That makes us distant

cousins. That also makes your husband Jewish under Nazi racial laws. Must have been dangerous in occupied France. And your husband's name?"

"Marc Fraser."



After a very long day, a British soldier escorted Marchand to the rectory of the Cattedrale di Santa Maria Assunta.

Received warmly by Monsignor Rinaldi, she enjoyed dinner and a pleasant evening with the senior rector and two other priests. Tomorrow she promised to examine the many salvaged art objects stored in the Cathedral basement rescued from several churches damaged in the repeated bombings of Naples.

The elderly Rinaldi personally accompanied her the following morning to the subterranean chambers of the cathedral. Stacks of all manner of recovered art objects occupied the hallways of ancient burial vaults. Various alter pieces and statuary stood among broken confessionals and even broken sections of walls displaying frescoes.

She stopped to examine stacks of paintings in frames. A cursory look revealed some important 16th century works mixed in with lesser works of different periods. Everything covered in a dust undoubtedly from pulverized masonry and plaster. Some blacked with soot from fire.

"Monsignor Rinaldi, this is heartbreaking. From how many destroyed churches?"

"I believe what you see came from six churches, my child. But for the grace of God, our magnificent cathedral suffered only minor damage."

"My expertise is restoration of oil paintings. The immediate concern is the environment. From what I see, they need careful cleaning. The dust from plaster and masonry is abrasive and requires careful removal. Soot represents a different sort of problem. There appears little ventilation down here. I fear with the approaching hot humid weather these contaminants will only become more difficult to remove."

HUNTING ODESSA

"I understand your concerns. What do you suggest?" Rinaldi said.

"A secure place where we can begin restoration. What about the Museo di Capodimonte? Was it damaged in the bombings?"

Rinaldi touched his forehead in a gesture of *why did I not think of that?* "I believe it did not suffer serious damage. I shall contact them at once?"

"Perhaps I can help. I worked on a project there years ago. I know the curator, Signore Morra. They have facilities to house and conduct restorations on those art objects at most risk. You can say I will supervise the restoration of the oil paintings. But I will need the services of several people that I can train to assist in the work."

"I shall speak to the mother superior of the Order of Saint Bridget. Her order oversees the care of many paintings at the Hermitage of the Most Holy Saviour on a hill outside Naples. Undamaged in the bombings since it sits outside the city. Perhaps she can offer several of her sisters to assist you."

"Excellent. The sisters should prove ideal for the work. Their discipline will allow for my absences as I conduct my other work." The reference being to work associated with Vatican intelligence to which the Monsignor was aware.

"I welcome your services, Signora Marchand. My good friend Archbishop Bernardini of course informed me of your real mission here in Italy. When the time comes for you to go to the Vatican, I shall make the appropriate arrangements. Until that time, I shall accept God's blessing in His sending you to assist in Italy's recovery by rescuing our artistic treasures."



After a good night's rest, Marchand felt a surge of confidence. Things began falling into place. Stumbling into the British sector and working with the likable Major Rothschild, a distant relative of Marc's, was a stroke of real luck. Might improve her chances of gaining help from Captain Trakonitz to introduce her to this Rome partisan group.

A jeep driven by Major Rothschild called for her at the rectory at seven o'clock.

"Captain Trakonitz will meet us at the trattoria. Let me tell you a little of his background. A most unusual and resourceful fellow. A Palestinian Jew emigrating from Prague, Czechoslovakia in '38 after the German occupation. Lost his family to the Nazis. Speaks Czech, German, English, Hebrew, and Italian. Learned Italian after joining the British Army then fighting Italians and Germans in North Africa.

"Served in the elite commando SAS unit in North Africa. Chaps trained to operate behind enemy lines. Trakonitz proved so talented, he quickly earned promotion to sergeant then to lieutenant for the invasion of Sicily. His mission in the desert was deep penetration reconnaissance. His specialty capturing prisoners on night forays into the desert. Trakonitz usually commanded a small select squad. They typically sought to capture and return with a single soldier for interrogation after silently dispatching others. One can only imagine embarking on successive missions of this type in two years of combat.

"He brought along those skills as we took on the Germans on the Italian peninsula. Trakonitz was a natural to continue reconnaissance efforts behind enemy lines working with Italian partisans."

Marchand understood the unstated use of *dispatched* meant killing the enemy even if surrendering. Silently killing by knife or garrote. Taking more than a single prisoner impaired the unit's mobility to return to their own lines. *Ruthless* more descriptive for Captain Trakonitz than *resourceful*.

"I see why you referred to him as resourceful. That why you use him in the field to liaison with the partisans?"

"Exactly. His service record identifies exceptional skills in unarmed combat. A natural intelligence operative."

"I look forward to meeting Captain Trakonitz. With his blood-soaked past, do you think he will resent working with a woman?"

"Cannot say for sure. Trakonitz keeps his feelings in tight check. A bit intense perhaps. Although in the British Army, he harbors a keen resentment of the British Mandate's restriction of

HUNTING ODESSA

Jewish immigration to Palestine. Not sure how that will play out when the war ends.

"Before joining the British Army he severed with the Haganah, the underground army of the Yishuv, the Jewish community in Palestine. In fact, he was part of the Haganah's elite fighting force the Palmach. This shared in a brief uncharacteristic personal revelation. We have an excellent working relationship but Trakonitz keeps largely to himself."

The small restaurant was on a street suffering comparatively light damage from the months of Allied bombing. "*Buonasera, Guido,*" Rothschild said as he shook hands with the elderly proprietor. Reverting to English, he said, "This is Signora Marchand."

Marchand extended her hand and greeted him in Italian followed by saying she was happy to return to Italy after many years, but saddened by all the destruction.

Guido fairly fell all over himself so delighted to meet this foreign woman fluent in Italian. Carrying on a constant dialogue, he ushered them to a table and brought a bottle of wine and glasses.

"You certainly made a hit with Guido. He is in the back telling his wife about the pretty foreigner that just walked in speaking Italian. His wife does the cooking and Guido manages the customers."

Moments after Rothschild poured wine for each of them, a short British officer of average physical stature approached the table.

"Madame Marchand, let me introduce Captain Pavel Trakonitz."

Offering her hand, her first impression was how short he was. Perhaps 5 feet 8 inches. In her mind, she was expecting a hulking rough sort. Hard to imagine this slight fellow killing enemy soldiers with his bare hands. Yet his hands were exceptionally large for his small frame and his sinewy strong forearms evident with his rolled-up sleeves.

"Major Rothschild said you are Czech. Escaped to Palestine when the Nazis invaded. I know how that feels. I am French, escaped to Switzerland one step ahead of the Nazis."

"What were you doing that put you in danger?" Trakonitz said.

"My husband and I were with the French Resistance. We collected intelligence information not easily transmitted by radio from various Resistance groups then sent it on to London. Maps and photographs. My husband had a cover allowing him to travel throughout France. Useful for obtaining sensitive information on German coastal defenses."

"Now you are with the American OSS?"

"Yes. My war against the Nazis is not over. I lost my brother to the Nazis."

"The Major says your husband is Jewish. Are you also Jewish?"

"No. However, the French police rounded up my brother with a group of Jews and sent him to the camps nonetheless. I do not know if he is alive."

Trakonitz nodded. "I escaped Prague just after graduating from university. My parents and a sister delayed leaving until it was too late. All remaining Jews in Prague, over 40,000 perished. First sent to the Theresienstadt Ghetto but eventually shipped off to the Auschwitz extermination camp in Poland."

Trakonitz recounted his personal tragedy with no expression of anguish. "My story is no different than countless tens of thousands of others."

A wound now held so deeply he refused to let it emotionally surface. Quickly moving away from that subject, he said, "The Major says your orders are to make contact with Italian partisans?"

"Among other things. My mission is to gather intelligence useful in determining the political direction of postwar Italy."

Trakonitz said in excellent Italian, "Do you speak fluent Italian?"

Marchand answered in Italian, "I believe good enough to get along. Do you agree?"

Trakonitz offered a rare smile and nodded.

"Major Rothschild said you often meet with a woman from a Rome partisan group. Any chance that might happen again soon?"

HUNTING ODESSA

"I received word just today. This Friday. The rendezvous is to be in a small village south of the German Gustav Line. To the east, up in the mountains."

Marchand observed Trakonitz did not reveal the name of the woman or the name of the village.

"Can I join you, Captain?"

Trakonitz looked at Rothschild who nodded affirmatively. "Her orders come from Joint Allied Headquarters. *Render all assistance it says.*"

"Very well. We leave early. Five o'clock. Not sure how long it will take to get there. Probably several hours. The rendezvous is to be at mid-day. A hilltop town recently liberated. The German lines are not far to the north."

"This woman partisan has crossed through German lines before to meet with you?"

"Yes. She is resourceful and possesses great courage."



Captain Trakonitz headed his jeep northeast climbing ever-higher hills as they approached the spine of the Italian peninsula. Their destination the hilltop town of Venafro. Slow going with the endless caravans of military vehicles going in the same direction. The spring thaw left the secondary roads rutted. A rough ride that stretched to more than three hours.

Expecting a picturesque Italian town, Marchand looked on a scene of similar devastation to Naples.

"What happen here, Captain?" Marchand said in Italian, intending to settle into the comfort of the language she had not used for years.

"Bitter fighting here for the last six months. In March, Allied bombers mistook it for Monte Cassino just thirty kilometers to the west and hit it hard in a bombing raid."

A significant British Army force now occupied the town.

"Where are we supposed to meet Capponi?"

"At the front entrance to the Castle Pandone. Carla is her first name but she goes by Elena. There is food and water in the back. Hungry?"

"Yes, and thirsty. Already getting hot."

"A cold winter just a few months ago. A tough go for the British forces as we moved north on the right flank of the Allied thrust north."

"Much different conditions than you experienced in North Africa I imagine."

Two hours later a petite woman dressed in hiking attire approached the jeep.

"Elena, good to see you." Trakonitz said as he embracing her. "Any difficulties?"

"Not really. The Germans are preoccupied preparing for retreat."

Capponi turned to Marchand.

"This is Fiona Marchand, Elena. An American intelligence agent. Formerly with the French Resistance so you have that in common."

Marchand got out of the jeep and extended her hand to Capponi. "Quite a trek from Rome. How long?" She said in Italian.

Capponi smiled. "Five days. Partly by mule with the help of locals for food and shelter."

"What information makes this trip so important?" Trakonitz asked.

"As I said. The Germans are preparing to pull back north again soon. I saw all sorts of indications as I came through their lines. The Allies will undoubtedly break through the Gustav Line and then the secondary defensive Caesar C Line. Fortunately, the Germans already declared Rome an open city sparing its destruction. Here is the important information I brought you."

From her backpack, Capponi extracted a leather cylinder and handed it to Trakonitz.

"Inside is a full set of Kesselring's retreat plan once Rome falls. It describes the defensive details of what the Germans are calling the Gothic line. Their main defensive line. It starts north of Pisa and Firenze using the mountains south of Bologna as a natural defense. Extends to the Adriatic just south of Rimini. The Germans are using 15,000 slave laborers to construct bunkers, machine gun emplacements, and even artillery casements.

HUNTING ODESSA

"The source also provided maps. Photographs of the original documents."

Trakonitz extracted the rolls of full size photographs. Leafing through them brought a look of surprise followed by a broad smile.

"This is astounding, Elena. The source of yours?"

"I prefer not to say. Only my commander and I know his identity. An Italian. Trusted by the German command. Reliable. What I provided you in the past came from the same source. I know his motivation for spying on the Germans."

Trakonitz handed the photos to Marchand. She understood the map references but did not read German. Yet if legitimate, of extraordinary intelligence importance.

"One other thing. The source tells of an interim plan to stall the Allied advance once the Germans pull back north of Rome. Something called the Trasimene Line. Unfortunately that planning is still evolving so he cannot yet provide any details beyond the operational name."

Trakonitz spent only a brief time examining the photographed documents. It required much closer examination by planning experts to adjust Allied countermeasures. Capponi took the opportunity to eat sandwiches they brought and drink from a bottle of wine. Marchand engaged Capponi by sharing backgrounds.

Anxious to return to Naples with this critical intelligence, Trakonitz spent the next hour pumping Capponi for what information she could provide from observations during her journey.

Making ready to leave, he said, "You returning to Rome immediately, Elena?"

"Tomorrow. I will spend the night with a cousin who lives here then head out tomorrow night, rested and provisioned."

Trakonitz embraced her. "Be careful. I will look you up when we liberate Rome. How can I contact you?"

"Here is my business card. I manage a small food distribution cooperative. Gives me the freedom and cover to move about outside the city to obtain produce to sell to markets and restaurants in Rome."

Douglas Clark