



Tapestry of War

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EGYPT AND NEIGHBOURING COUNTRIES
DURING WORLD WAR II

CHAPTER ONE

Alexandria, June 1941

It was just after dawn when Fran saw the body. She had set out from home in the pitch-black, as soon as she heard the all-clear sounded. She hadn't known quite where she was going, but she was restless and hot after lying awake listening to the anti-aircraft guns, and the house seemed stuffy and confining despite its high ceilings.

She headed as so often before along the Corniche in the direction of the town, drawing in the sea air, shaking her head to clear her frustrations. The sky was indigo, and the sea on her right was inky black, and as ripples of fire began to snake across it she slowed her rapid pace and stopped to watch. Within what seemed like minutes the sun had risen over the waves, both sea and sky lightened to silver and violet, and to the east all was bathed in shades of orange. The sea barely moved, and all was still from here to the horizon. It was hard to believe that all night the anti-aircraft guns had been blazing against the Luftwaffe's bombs.

Fran leant against the railings and breathed deeply, sucking in the smell of the ozone on the warm breeze.

The beach was so busy during the day, especially at weekends, and it was wonderful to see it like this, deserted, becalmed in a bubble of early morning peace. Her eyes strayed to the left, past the breakwater, where the dark sand was taking on shades of gold. It was then that she saw something in the shadows of the breakwater, right down by the water's edge.

It was too big to be a normal piece of flotsam, and for a moment Fran wondered whether it was a piece of debris from a ship, or a floating mine washed up onto the shore. But then she spotted a white shirt, and with a jolt she realised the form was human, a body lying huddled in to the breakwater as though for shelter.

It was strange how long it took her to move. The almost drugged silence of the morning seemed to have made her sluggish, and her brain and her body couldn't quite work together. Eventually, though, she moved along by the railings until she reached some steps, and with her hands clenched made her way down the beach.

She forced herself to approach the body, but when it moved she gasped and took two steps back. It had only been an infinitesimal movement, but suddenly this wasn't a corpse but a living person lying in the sand. His white shorts and shirt were dry too, so he hadn't been washed up here, but had come down the beach from the Corniche. Was he simply asleep, drunk, perhaps?

She didn't want to touch him, but as she stared from her withdrawn space she spotted dark spots in the sand leading away from the man. They were blood, she was sure. This man had been injured.

She mastered her fears and bent to him, turning him with

difficulty. He groaned but didn't wake up. Her first thought was surprise at how young he was; her second that he must be French, from the insignia on his matelot's shirt. The group of French navy men whose ships were impounded here in Alexandria were a familiar sight. They maintained loyalty to Vichy France, but had claimed neutral status, and roamed the town pretty freely. What had this one done to put himself back into the war?

The front of his shirt was covered in blood, and he'd brought his right hand up to hold his chest. Inchingly Fran eased it away to reveal a slash in the shirt and an ugly-looking wound beneath, just below the heart. It was bleeding still, and the sand where he had lain was soaked with blood. How much blood could you lose without dying? Fran didn't know, but the enormity of what she was seeing terrified her. She remembered hearing that you should strap wounds tight by tearing up people's clothes, but couldn't figure out how she could remove his shirt. Frantically she pulled off his shoes and socks, and stuffed the socks clean end first into the wound, then she pulled off his belt and eased it around his chest to hold the socks more tightly. It seemed to cut into him cruelly, and the socks dug into the wound. Could she rip his shirt? She grabbed at the edge where the shirt had been slashed and pulled at the blood-soaked fabric. It gave fairly easily, and she kept on ripping until she had a patch of clean cloth that she placed next to the wound, sitting the socks as cushioning above it before resealing the belt.

Then she rose to her feet and looked up and down the still deserted beach and out to sea. Where were the fishermen who ought by now to have set sail from the Eastern Harbour? There was nobody, just nobody.

The camps of Greek refugees were nearly a mile away nearer to the town, and she would lose too much time going in that direction for help. The quickest might be to run to the British Consulate, which was just half a mile or so away. There would be guards there even at this hour, and there was transport. Or should she just chance going to the nearest house and hoping she could wake up the local residents?

It was while she was thinking this through that she spotted a man out running on the Corniche. He was too far away, surely, and he would never hear her from where he was, but she called out, and when the runner didn't turn she called louder. 'Help! *Au secours!*' She waited, preparing to go up the beach herself in search of help, but when she gave one more rather desperate cry he turned, and stopped, staring down the beach at her. She waved, and called again. 'Please help me!' He was European, she was sure, and would understand English.

The runner looked around for the steps, and within seconds was next to her, looking down at the young Frenchman, and then back up at Fran.

'What on earth has happened here? Are you all right?' he asked quickly, panting slightly.

Fran responded gratefully to the urgency in his voice. 'I was out walking and spotted him. He was just lying huddled here. I think he must have been bleeding for hours,' she said, and her voice came out ragged. 'I tried to stop the bleeding . . .' She trailed off, looking down at her own clothes, spattered with the young man's blood.

There was relief in the man's face. He was British, but not English – Scottish, perhaps, or possibly Irish? 'I thought

perhaps that you had been injured too,' he said. 'So we've got a casualty from last night, it seems.'

'From last night?'

'Yes, some of these French navy fellows were out on the town and got attacked by Free French troops. There's not much love among the fighting French for those who've chosen capitulation to Germany.'

'But he's a long way from the town!'

'Yes, he must have been chased.' He felt the young man's pulse and grimaced. 'Well, if the blighter's not to peg it now I'd better get help. He's lost more blood than any man should. Are you all right yourself, Miss . . . ?'

'Miss Trevillian, Frances Trevillian. Yes, I'm fine, don't worry. Do go and get help quickly.'

He held out a hand to her. 'I'm Jim MacNeill.' He checked the makeshift dressing she had made. 'This is good and tight,' he said approvingly. 'You'll be all right staying with him? Are you sure?' The words were more routine than truly concerned, and she liked that he didn't treat her like a weak female. She'd had enough of that recently.

'Yes, yes, I'm fine! Please go!' she urged him. 'I'll stay and keep the dressing tight. He may wake up, too.' The Frenchman had shown some signs of stirring since she'd begun manhandling him, and she didn't want him to come to and find himself alone.

MacNeill nodded, and ran off up the beach. Fran sat down with her back to the breakwater and eased her patient's head on to her lap. Don't die, she willed him, pulling out her handkerchief to wipe his rather clammy brow. Then she leant her head back against the breakwater and closed her eyes.

Her father would be back at home having breakfast by now. Her unstated destination in heading this way along the Corniche had been the British Boat Club, where the civilian yachtsmen who acted as spotters for Naval Command during air raids would by now have moored up and gone off to enjoy their weekends. Fran had been so mad last night at not being allowed to join them, just because she was female. Thank God, in retrospect, for if she hadn't been so frustrated she wouldn't have been here this morning. All that mattered now was that this young man shouldn't die.

She cradled his head. Where had her runner gone to? He seemed to have been gone for ever. She looked out to sea, trying not to give in to her fears. He is *not* going to die, she told herself again.

She looked down at him again, and his eyes were open. A surge of hope ran through her. She smiled, reassuringly she hoped, and spoke to him in French.

'Well done, you woke up! You'll be fine now. We've got an ambulance coming, and we'll have you in hospital soon in a comfortable bed.'

His eyes didn't register anything, and she wondered whether he was hearing her, but she carried on anyway, talking to him about anything and everything. She eased his head into what she hoped was a better position, and asked if he was comfortable. He gave an infinitesimal nod.

'*Merci*,' he said, in what was almost a voice.

She smiled at him in relief. 'Don't thank me!'

He would be a couple of years younger than Michael, she thought, just a teenager. She was only a few years older herself, but with Michael she always felt more than her

years, and with this baby-faced boy she felt like a mother.

Who cared what side he was on? He wasn't fighting with the Germans, just trying to obey his own government by remaining neutral. To the Free French fighters he was to be despised. They were heading off to risk their lives in the desert while he sat out the war in comfort, and if you had asked her yesterday Fran would have agreed with them. But had he deserved a knife between the ribs?

By the time help came he had lost consciousness again. The first to arrive was the Scotsman MacNeill with two first-aiders from the consulate. They brought with them proper dressings and a stretcher, and by the time the ambulance arrived they were already carrying their patient up the steps to the Corniche.

Fran followed behind them. Their professionalism excluded her, and she watched rather impotently from the fringes. The young boy looked small and vulnerable, strapped into the stretcher, his face stripped of all colour.

'Is he going to be all right?' she asked a burly British forces ambulance man.

'He'll be right as rain, miss,' was his reply. 'Better than he deserves, weasel of a collaborator getting himself into a fight on a Friday night.'

'But he isn't even carrying a weapon!' she protested. 'He isn't allowed any, remember.'

'Hah!' was all the ambulance man replied, but Jim MacNeill frowned at him.

'Miss Trevillian saved him, remember. I think she has a right to care about his recovery.'

Fran turned to him thankfully. 'Can I find out how he gets on? We don't even know his name.'

He nodded. 'I'll find that out, don't worry, and if you can give me a contact number I'll make sure you get a call.'

'You can call me at the *Alexandria Journal*,' she told him. 'I'm the assistant editor there.'

He raised an eyebrow, but other than that said nothing. It was the ambulance man who spoke.

'Do you want to come with us, Lieutenant?'

So the Scotsman was an officer. 'Are you an army man, Lieutenant?' she asked him.

'No – navy,' he answered. He smiled at her. 'That was good work you did this morning, Miss Trevillian. If it's all right with you, these two' – he indicated the first-aiders from the consulate – 'can take you home in their car, and I'll go with the ambulance to see where our friend is taken to, and to follow up who he is. You'll be wishing to change, no doubt.'

Fran looked down at her filthy clothes, and her bloodstained hands, and agreed. 'I could do with a bath,' she acknowledged. 'Thank you for coming to my aid, Lieutenant MacNeill.'

'It's my pleasure,' he answered, in that soft accent of his. 'I agree with you, you know. Whatever side you are on, a knife in the ribs is no way to fight a war.'