

IN THE MIDST OF THE FLAMES

JP ROBINSON

Northshire Heritage Book II
In the Midst of the Flames

To my sister, Rachel.

There comes a time when all God's prodigals return home.

Cast of Characters

The British

The Steele Family

Sir Thomas Steele-head of the Bank of England

Malcolm Steele-son of Sir Thomas, Commander of the 7th Battalion, Northumberland Fusiliers

Leila Steele-wife of Malcolm, former German spy and heir of Northshire Estate

The Thompson Family

Will Thompson-husband of Eleanor, erstwhile friend of Malcolm

Eleanor Thompson-wife of Will and military nurse

Prominent members of Northshire Staff:

Harold Greyson-butler & personal assistant to Sir Thomas

Jenny Edwards-Lady's maid to Leila Steele

Prominent Politicians:

David Lloyd George-Prime Minister of England

Sir Robert Hughes-Head of British Secret Intelligence Service

Earl Curzon-President of the British War Council

Alfred Milner, Bonar Law, Arthur Henderson-Members of the British War Council

The Germans

The Meier Family

Burkhard Meier-father of Katja, landowner near Munster, Germany

Adele Meier-wife of Burkhard, mother of Katja

Katja Meier-daughter of Burkhard & Adele, sister of deceased Markus

The Haber Family

Fritz Haber-scientist, husband to Clara and Charlotte

Clara Haber-deceased wife to Fritz

Hermann Haber-son of Fritz and Clara

Miscellaneous:

Charlotte Nathan- Fritz Haber's mistress

Werner Jaeger-Head of German Foreign Intelligence (Department 3B)

Nathaniel Leonard-Captain of Northshire's guards

Aengus O'Malley-London-based gang leader and affiliate of *Sinn Fein*

Karl Schmidt-colleague and friend to Fritz Haber

Uther Klein-general and regional commander of Munster POW camp

Elijah Farrows-Farmer and pastor to Northshire's tenants

Lieutenant-Colonel James Stewart-British commander of Northumberland Fusiliers, 28th Division

Arthur Hoffman-Member of Swiss Federal Council

General Falkenhayn- German army's Chief of Staff

*Prologue**Amsterdam, Netherlands, October 1914*

“In thirty seconds, you will die.” The hammer of the black Luger slid in place with an unfeeling *click*. He pressed the gun hard against her forehead. “Now,” his voice was as unfeeling as the metal that bit into her flesh, “tell me what you know.”

Leila Durand squirmed, twisting her bound wrists, as she glared at the small but powerfully-built bearded madman, whose black-gloved hands peeked out of the sleeve of an equally dark greatcoat. His clothes were that of a businessman—a starched white shirt, a black suit that was just visible beneath his coat, and a solid black necktie. But the hard glare in his eyes and the pressure of the gun against her forehead left no room for doubt. This man would kill her.

Give. She again wrenched her wrists hard, ignoring the pain. They were bound behind a straight-backed chair, plaited together by knots of coarse rope that cut into her skin. Chains, wrapped around her chest and arms, held her immobile.

I'm trapped.

He grinned at her, the white of his teeth at odds with the darkness that cascaded from his hooded eyes. She tried to ignore the wild galloping of her heart and focused on the circumstances that had brought her here—wherever *here* was. All she knew was that she was in some hole in the ground in neutral Amsterdam with a maniac who meant to kill her.

Unless, of course, she spilled her guts.

After two years of clandestine field operations for the German government Leila had been ordered to return to Antwerp for an intense two-week training session. This was to be expected given the recent outbreak of the Great War.

Her instructor was none other than the formidable Elsbeth Schragmüller. Two days ago, Elsbeth had sent her to shadow a British agent in Amsterdam who was to meet a contact at a shipping house.

The man had held a brief conversation with a newspaper correspondent—an Allied spy no doubt—and Leila had managed to get close enough to hear most of his conversation while remaining unseen.

Elated by her initial success, Leila had slipped off into the growing gloom and headed toward the train depot where she would catch the last train across the border. But her trip back to the *Kriegsnachrichtenstelle*, or espionage training school in Antwerp, had been cut short as a group of men materialized out of the darkness and blocked her path on the deserted street.

A quick glance in the dim light around confirmed that escape was impossible. The high walls of Amsterdam's dikes rose on both sides. She had whirled around, only to see four men rushing toward her from behind, weapons drawn. Heart sinking, she had raised both hands in surrender. There was no sense dying here.

After jerking a black hood over her head, they had dragged her into some sort of abandoned warehouse then, sometime during the night, she had been roughly thrown into the small confines of this windowless tomb.

Who were those men? Gritting her teeth, Leila strained again at the bonds. She had eluded death in the street only to die in a cellar. Questions hummed in the back of her mind like whining mosquitoes.

Who is he? British? French?

Leila gave herself a stern mental shake. Right now she had to figure out how to get out of this mess. The questions she could shelve off for another time. *If there is another time.* A single candle blazed on a wooden table, transforming her abductor's face into a contorted mask of demonic frenzy.

"I'll only ask one more time." He drew back his hand and slammed the butt of his semiautomatic pistol against the side of her face. "What did you hear?"

Leila's head whipped to one side as the metal connected with her skin. For a moment, the candle seemed to wink out. She blinked rapidly, knowing that if she lost consciousness now, she would never wake up.

"N-nothing." Her breath came in short, ragged bursts. The pain was blinding. "I don't know what you're talking about."

She looked up at him, ignoring the throbbing in her skull. "I told you. I'm just a student. That's all. A student."

He dropped into a crouch, teeth bared. "Do you take me for a fool?" He raised the gun and pulled the trigger.

Pft!

The bullet sped by her neck and bit into the chair, sending splinters of wood into the air. A silencer had absorbed most of the sound, but she could swear that the pounding of her heart would've drowned out the noise of the shot anyway.

"The next one will be in your eye." He laid a gloved finger on his pursed lips. "The right one, I think."

Leaping forward, her captor grabbed her hair with his left hand. Leila cried out as he jerked her head backward.

"Tell me!" His shout made her ears ring.

Tears leaked out of her eyes.

I won't. He won't break me.

She shook her head as she gasped out the words. "I... don't know... anything!"

He slammed his fist onto the chair and, with a growl, tossed the gun onto the table then withdrew a wicked-looking knife.

She stared, wide-eyed and chest heaving as he twirled it around in his hand. "W-what are you doing?"

He threw her a wolfish grin. "I'm going to cut off one of your ears. Do you have a preference?"

"N-no, no!" She writhed in the chair, desperate now. Her mind whirled. *Is information worth such a price?* She wavered but then a spark of rebellion surged in her, rising above the throbbing pain and fear.

“Then tell me what I want to know.” He placed the edge of the knife against the fleshy part of her right ear. “Tell me.” The knife bit into her skin and she felt a fiery finger of pain then the slow drip of a trickle of blood.

“I can’t!” She was gasping now and soaked with sweat. Her bladder felt like it would burst at any moment. “Nothing. I’ve nothing to tell, I swear it.”

“You’re lying!” He pressed in deeper, the edge of his knife cutting into her pale skin. A ragged scream ripped out of her throat. *I won’t ... give ... in!*

“Nothing!” The cords of her neck bulged as her wails filled the room. “Nothing... to say.”

He fell silent then eased the pressure off her ear and withdrew.

Sobbing, Leila trembled in the chair watching his every move with wide eyes. He straightened, pulled a handkerchief from his breast pocket and wiped her blood off the edge of the blade.

She knew from the slight sting on the right side of her head that he had cut her, but not deeply. *God ... oh God.*

With a terse nod, he strode over to the far wall then pulled on a cord. Electric light flooded the room, making her wince.

“Open your eyes, Leila Durand.”

Hesitating at first, she obeyed, licking her lips.

He leaned casually against a wooden table with his arms folded across his chest. Her eyes darted to the gun and knife which rested on the table near the flickering candle.

“I am General Werner Jaäger, head of His Imperial Majesty Kaiser Wilhelm II’s Foreign Espionage unit called Department 3B.”

She gaped at him. “You’re...”

“I am your commanding officer.” A thin smile played about his lips.

“B-but—”

He held up a hand, forestalling the swarm of questions that hummed in her mind. Or was that ringing sound her battered head?

“Elsbeth, cut her bonds.”

Footsteps sounded behind her and, after a brief moment, the ropes, then the chains, slackened and fell. Leila rose and turned, rubbing her chafed wrists.

“*Fraülein?*”

“Well done Leila.” Her teacher nodded, the corners of her thin lips turning upward. “Well done indeed.”

General Jaäger stood upright, clasping his hands behind his back. Keeping a wary eye on him, Leila retreated behind the chair.

“Don’t worry, the test is over.” Jaäger stood still. “Elsbeth spoke well of you and it appears her judgment was correct.”

Leila’s fingers probed the wound behind her ear. The flow of blood had stopped. “Test?”

“I wanted to see if you would break under interrogation.” He motioned toward the table. “What I saw is... encouraging. The British aren’t as ruthless with captured female spies as I can be. If you won’t break under my interrogation tactics...”

Her eyes widened as the implications of his words sank in. Shadowing the supposed Englishman, her abduction, imprisonment and torture—it had all been an elaborate scheme to see how much torture she could endure.

“But why?”

The papers in the Netherlands were full of advertisements posted by both the Germans and British soliciting informants and espionage agents. It was difficult to believe that all prospective recruits were subjected to such brutality.

General Jaeger rocked back on his heels, his eyes probing her battered face. At length, he reached inside his pocket and pulled out a sealed envelope.

“Your orders are here, written in code. Read them. Memorize them. Burn them.”

She took the envelope and slipped it into the pocket of her wrinkled skirt. “I will.”

“There is something else.” Werner came closer and this time she held her ground. He nodded his tacit approval, his eyes shifting to Elsbeth’s impassive face then back to Leila.

“What I am about to say is *not* written in your orders.” He drew a cigar from his pocket, lit it and inhaled deeply before speaking again. “In the event that the Fatherland loses this war, the Kaiser has ordered me to develop a contingency plan. It is called

Herkules. To execute this operation, I will need to have agents already in place, ready to move at a moment's notice.”

She furrowed a brow, trying to think past the pounding in her skull. “That is what this was all about?”

“Precisely.” He drew again on his cigar. “If *Herkules* is carried out, it will end European civilization as we know it.”

Releasing his breath in a cloud of smoke he said, “When the heads of all our enemies gather together to sign a peace treaty, you and the other agents will follow specific directions. All non-German heads of state will be assassinated in one blow.”

A chill ran through her. “All?”

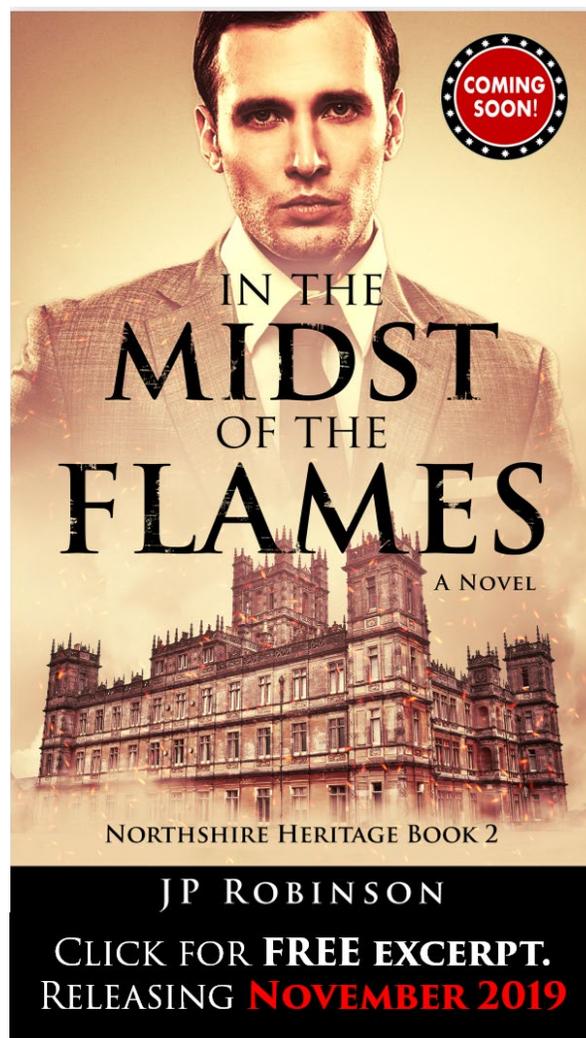
“All.” His eyes probed hers. “Germany will take advantage of the ensuing chaos and will seize control of France and England in a final bid for power. Leaderless, the nations will fall at our feet. Now, I am certain you understand the need for my little... experiment.” He gestured toward her ear.

“I-I do.” She had been right. Ordinary agents were not subjected to this level of interrogation. Gingerly, Leila touched her ear again. An odd sense of pride swelled within her. It was an honor to have been chosen. *And I did not give in.*

Jaäger sniffed. “Elsbeth will see to your wounds.” He gently touched her cheek. “When they have healed, you will depart for Great Britain and the home of Sir Thomas Steele.”

He tossed the still-burning cigar onto the floor and ground it underfoot with the heel of his black boot. “If you do not wish to be a part of *Herkules*, speak now and I will end your life mercifully.” Werner jerked his head toward the chair. “What you saw is only the beginning of what I will do to you if you betray me.”

Leila lifted her chin and stood with shoulders straight and chest thrust forward. “You’ve seen me prove my loyalty to the Fatherland, General.” She fixed her green eyes upon his unblinking stare. “I will not fail you.”





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