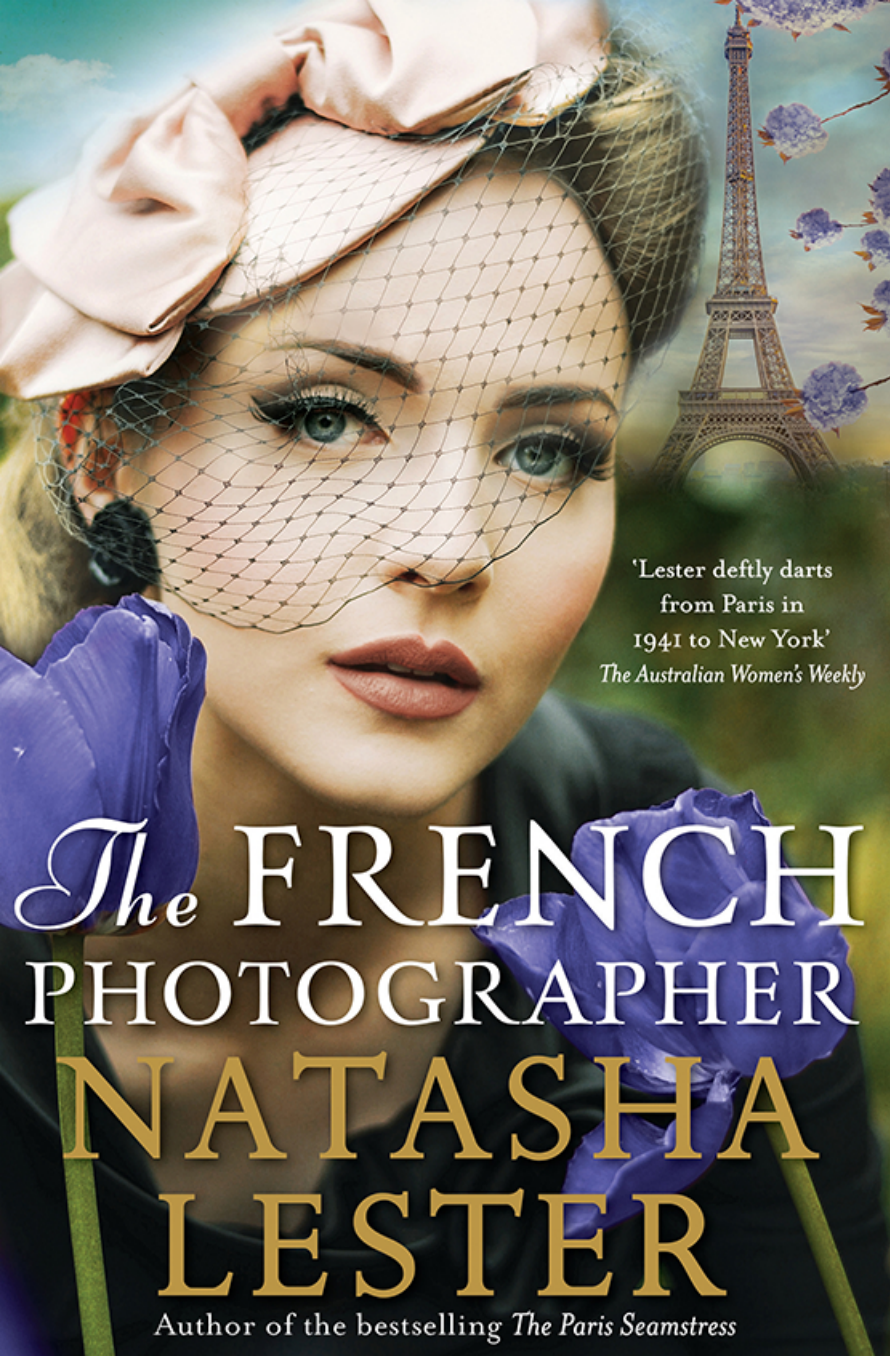
'Lester deftly darts from Paris in 1941 to New York'
The Australian Women's Weekly
The FRENCH PHOTOGRAPHER
NATASHA LESTER
Author of the bestselling The Paris Seamstress

The FRENCH PHOTOGRAPHER

Also by Natasha Lester

A Kiss from Mr Fitzgerald
Her Mother's Secret
The Paris Seamstress

The FRENCH PHOTOGRAPHER

NATASHA LESTER

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To Rebecca Saunders, publisher extraordinaire, whose belief in me is the greatest gift any writer could have. Thank you.

PART ONE
Jess

It is almost impossible today, almost fifty years later, to conceive how difficult it was for a woman correspondent to get beyond a rear-echelon military position, in other words to the front, where the action was.

– David E. Scherman, *LIFE* magazine correspondent

One

NEW YORK, SEPTEMBER 1942

Jessica May turned on her famous smile and raised her arm aloft, her movements as repetitive as those of the riveters and welders and all the other jobs women were doing these days. Except that she wasn't in a factory and she wasn't wearing overalls.

Instead, she stood on a white platform, backdropped by a brilliant autumnal sky, wearing a white silk dress, bridal in length. It was designed to cling to the front of her body – helped along by the fans blowing over her – and then billow behind her in the artificial breeze, goddess-like. A white cape tied at her neck rippled too, adding to the celestial effect. Two large American flags fluttered proudly beside her, and her outstretched arm made it appear as if she might declaim something important at any moment. But that was also part of the make-believe; since when did a model have anything momentous to say about patriotism and war?

Once upon a time she'd marched passionately in the streets of Paris protesting against fascism, first as its vile ideology swept through Spain, then as it turned Italy and Germany into grotesqueries. Now Jessica May was simply the figurehead of a ship. Or Toni Frissell, the photographer, would make her into one after the photograph had been cropped and manipulated in just the right way

for the cover of *Vogue*, a cover that would be as galvanising as everyone needed it to be in late 1942. Nobody would ever know that there was no ship, no water, no sea breeze, no goddess; just a few props in a field in upstate New York, beside a herd of cows with quizzical eyes chewing over the interruption to their ordinarily pastoral outlook.

Toni asked her to rearrange her face. To look solemn. To respect the flag and the men and her country and the fighting. Jess did as she was asked.

'Perfect,' Toni said soon after. 'I don't need any more.'

So Jess stepped off the platform, batting away the wardrobe assistant who wanted to help her down. She unhooked the cape and moved behind a screen where the assistant helped her change into the next outfit, a Claire McCardell bathing suit made of black wool jersey with a very low-cut v-neckline and a row of brass hook-and-eye closures down the front.

This time, when Jess climbed onto the platform, she sat between the flags, pretending to dip her toes into the imaginary water that readers of *Vogue* would think lay just out of shot. She smiled and tipped her face up to the sun, leaning back on her elbows. A cow bellowed its approval and she laughed. Toni caught the shot at just the right moment.

Then a car drew up in a hurry on the dirt road alongside the field. Belinda Bower, *Vogue* editor and Jess's friend, stepped out and picked her way across the field in a pencil skirt and heels, wobbling, but clearly determined not to appear as out of place as a tuxedo at the seaside. Toni lowered the camera and Jess straightened. Bel never interfered with photo shoots. Something was up.

Which Belinda confirmed moments later when she reached Jess and showed her a full-page Kotex advertisement in *McCall's*. The words, *It has women's enthusiastic approval!* were emblazoned across the top of the page. Underneath, Jessica May posed idly in an evening gown as if she hadn't a care in the world, and especially not about the taboo subject of menstruation.

'Goddammit!' Jess said.

'Goddammit,' Bel agreed. 'Shoot's off,' she called to the makeup artists, the hairstylists, Toni's assistant, and Toni.

Toni packed her camera away without asking any questions. But the eyes of everyone else remained fixed on Jess and Bel. There was no good reason to call off a shoot that everyone could see had been going exceptionally well. Unless Jessica May was in some kind of trouble. And that was both likely and a toothsome piece of gossip nobody wanted to miss.

'It had to be Emile,' Jess muttered as they walked across to the privacy of the cows. 'He took that picture of me last year. He must have sold it to Kotex.'

'I thought so,' Bel replied. 'I tried to get Condé to change his mind; hell, he wanted me to change his mind – you know he adores you – but we also know the advertisers would abandon us quicker than Joan Blondell can remove her clothes.'

Despite everything, Jess grinned at the quip. Then she sighed. Bel was right. None of *Vogue*'s advertisers would want their products appearing in the magazine that had the Kotex girl on the cover. Because the Kotex girl was what she'd be known as from now on. Even living with Emile out of wedlock wasn't as great a sin as menstruation. 'How long will I be on the blacklist?' she asked.

'I don't know,' Belinda said honestly. 'It depends how long Kotex run the ad for. Condé hopes we can have you back modelling for us next year, but . . .'

'Until then, I should murder Emile and find some other way to pay the rent,' Jess finished.

'Condé still wants you at his party tonight. He won't drop you for everything.'

Just my livelihood, Jess thought grimly. At the age of twenty-two and after almost three years, hundreds of outfits, countless lipstick re-applications, innumerable images of Jessica May in the pages of

Vogue and *Harper's Bazaar* and *Glamour* and much fussing over her blonde hair, it was over. She would no longer perpetuate a fantasy that, despite the war, a world still existed in which a woman might buy a low-cut bathing suit and, on a trip to the seaside, meet a prince and fall in love.

'Besides,' Bel continued, pushing the nose of a cow away from her Mainbocher jacket with the same force she used when disposing of hapless interns, 'now you'll have time to take more pictures for me. And to write for me.'

'Will Condé agree to that?'

Bel eyed Jess, who was still wearing the bathing suit in which her cleavage was displayed so winningly. 'Your by-line won't be anywhere near as intimidating to advertisers as a full-page of Jessica May in the flesh and not much else.'

A peal of laughter rang from Jess's mouth, so loudly that the team from the shoot all turned to look their way.

'Think about it,' Bel urged. 'You know how much I loved the few pieces you've done for me.'

'I will,' Jess said. 'But right now I need to change, go back to the city, and deal with Emile.'

'What will you say to him?' Bel asked as they walked over to the makeshift dressing room.

Jess unhooked the bathing suit, unconcerned that Belinda was with her, so used to undressing in front of people that it now seemed strange when she was alone in the apartment taking her clothes off without an audience. 'Something I would have said to him six months ago had he not returned from the training camp missing two fingers,' she said bleakly.

Hours later, Jess swept through the Stork Club, past the ostentatiously large flower displays and voluptuous velvet drapes, her eye fixed on a booth she regularly occupied. She was brought up short by

two men who wouldn't move aside to let her through and she dealt with them the same way she always dealt with men who thought the face and body of Jessica-May-the-model was theirs for the groping. 'You've left them there,' she said, indicating a spot on the floor.

As both men looked down, she shouldered her way past and called back to them, 'Your eyeballs, I mean.'

Emile smiled at her when she reached the booth, a smile she'd once thought suave and sensual. As usual, he wore his hair slicked back, his suit just the right side of louche to allow him entry into the Stork Club. He pushed a Manhattan across to her as she slid into the seat opposite. She took the drink and, in return, pushed Bel's copy of *McCall's* over to him.

'I thought you'd be pleased.' His smile widened, as if he thought one of his signature grins was all it took to have her thank him for ruining her career.

'You knew I wouldn't be. Otherwise you'd have told me.'

His smile stayed on. 'You're always saying I should start working again. I took your advice.'

They both looked at his right hand; at the remaining two fingers and thumb. Once upon a time, the handsome Frenchman, Emile Robard, had been one of the darlings of fashion photography, peer to Man Ray and Cecil Beaton, first in France and then in New York City, where he'd decamped in 1939 when war was declared. To where he and Jess had both decamped, to be precise – Jess might have been an American but she'd lived more than half her life in France with her parents, which is where she'd met Emile.

After arriving in New York, it took only a year for Emile Robard and Jessica May to become the darlings of both the scandal sheets and the social pages, the royalty of Greenwich Village artistes. A sought-after model and a French photographer, both, according to the press, blessed with enough beauty to lift any gathering to greatness.

That she'd shockingly dared to live with Emile, to be his *mistress*, was both titillating and thrilling to most Manhattanites whose

values were far more conservative than their cosmopolitan facades implied. What she hated most about it was the word – *mistress* – implying she lived off Emile's largesse. But her modelling career meant she had more than enough money of her own. In fact, over the last few months, he'd been the one burning through *her* money like packs of Lucky Strikes. He'd taught her photography, the press said – another lie, although he had bettered her skills. He'd ensured she was the face most loved by the fashion magazines – another untruth; she was perfectly capable of finding her own work and hadn't had to attend a go-see for two years.

And then earlier in the year, having witnessed the glory surrounding photographers like Robert Capa and Edward Steichen who were taking pictures of war, Emile had decided he wanted some of that lustre for himself. He'd cast off models and magazines and got himself assigned to an army training camp in Texas. Jess had been glad to have some time apart from him; the six months prior had seen Emile throwing himself at parties with the same passion he used to save for photography, and consuming whiskey as if it were air. It wasn't a lifestyle that Jess desired, given that late nights were incompatible with a magazine-worthy face, and nor did she want to be the vapid party-girl whose only concern was locating a suitable sofa to pass out on at three in the morning. She'd hoped that Emile's sudden urge to shoot training manoeuvres would result in him finding inspiration in something other than late nights and drunkenness, but he got into an argument with a private at the camp and ended up being shot himself, losing two fingers in the process.

When he returned with a bandaged hand, Emile told Jess he'd been defending her honour, that the private had made lewd comments about a photograph of her naked back in a magazine. It was her fault he'd lost his fingers and could no longer hold a camera properly. So she'd stayed with Emile even though she wasn't sure that she still loved him.

But now they were done. Jess could no longer go to work in the morning, leaving him in her apartment to drink whiskey all day, could no longer dance with him in the evenings with a model's empty smile pasted on her face, could no longer help him home and to bed because he was too drunk to walk. Could not ignore the fact that he'd lined his pockets with Kotex money at her expense.

Jess sent the martini glass the same way as the magazine. 'I meant that you should go out and take photographs. Not sell old pictures of me to Kotex to use for an ad you know will make me persona non grata in the modelling world. The only reason you can't hold a camera steady is because you drink too much. Your hand would be fine with just a little practice.'

Emile finished his drink, then picked up hers and took a long swallow. 'I did nothing wrong.'

Jess sighed. She had to say it. *It's over.* She had to forget looking up at a jazz club in Paris and seeing this man smile rakishly at her, had to forget dancing with him into the early hours of the morning, had to forget doing that most romantic of all things: walking hand in hand through the streets of Paris as the sun came up, stopping to buy espresso, stopping to kiss. Had to forget that what she'd had with him was a kind of love; hedonistic, exciting, suited to that time in her life when she'd thought she might go mad because both her parents had just died and she had nobody. Except Emile.

'*The New Yorker* telephoned for you this morning,' Emile said.

Jess wished she could ask him at another time, when he was less drunk and more merciful, but she had to know. 'What did they say?'

'They said your idea didn't interest them.' Emile's eyes roamed the room, settling on Gene Tierney, which was lucky; he wouldn't see the sting of his words made manifest in the clench of her jaw.

Being rejected at a go-see had never bothered her as much as a rejection by *The New Yorker*. She'd hoped her pitch might be a way to build on the handful of articles she'd written and photographed

for *Vogue*, about the female artists from Parsons School of Design who were now painting camouflage on aeroplanes and designing propaganda posters instead of creating their own artworks. This time, Jess had wanted to write about what might happen to all those women when the war ended and the men returned and reclaimed their old jobs. What would the women do with all their new skills? Would there still be jobs for them?

Jess had wanted to stand up high on a ladder and take photographs in the factories, pictures that showed how many women there were; not just one or two but an entire generation. She knew nobody could dismiss a photograph the same way they might consider words to be exaggerated. And she'd wanted to feel as if she was doing something that mattered; instead of screaming her outrage about fascism into the wind at the Place de la Concorde as she'd done when she was younger, she could show that war reverberated in ways beyond bullets, that the ramifications could be found in the hands of a woman who'd once sculpted bronze and who now fashioned aircraft propellers.

'They liked my idea,' Emile went on, leaning back and lighting a cigarette.

'Your idea?'

'I told them I'd write a piece about the jobs women aren't doing as well as the men who used to do them. I'd photograph the mistakes, expose the money it costs to make do with labour that isn't suited to the job. You Americans have been asked to believe a story about how well everyone is getting on with the new way of things but perhaps it's not true.'

'You didn't really.' She stared at him, expecting he would laugh and tell her she was mad; as if he'd write a story like that.

But he just stared back. 'I did.'

Her legs pushed her upright and the words came to her easily now that she no longer cared about kindness. 'You know this is over. We're holding on to something that happened a long time ago when I

was young and didn't know any better and when you were . . .' How to finish that sentence? 'A better man than you are now. And I'm not referring to your fingers.'

'Nobody ever refers to my fingers,' he retorted. 'But everyone thinks about them. About poor Emile who used to have the models falling at his feet.'

'That's what you miss?' she asked sadly. 'I'm sure if you're still able to stand by the end of the night, you'll be able to get someone to fall at your feet. I'll stay elsewhere for the next few days while you move your things out of the apartment.'

'How will I find somewhere to live on such short notice?' His voice was petulant, like a child's.

'I'll get the bank to transfer you enough money to pay your rent for a month. After that, your *articles*,' she couldn't quite keep the anger from her voice, 'will surely support you.' Then she left before either of them could say any more hurtful things.

The only thing to do after that was to go to a party. She arrived at midnight, which was late, but not impolitely so – the party never started at Condé Nast's Park Avenue apartment until ten at the earliest. Condé kissed Jess's cheeks and apologised for the stance he'd had to take with the Kotex ad.

He'd been the one to discover her, not long after she'd arrived back in New York City. She'd taken a different ship home than her parents because Emile hadn't been ready to leave on the SS *Athenia* – she couldn't even remember now why he'd prevaricated. Which was, everyone said, lucky for her because the *Athenia* had sunk and her parents had died. But how was that lucky?

A month after she'd arrived in Manhattan, when she'd at last made herself stop crying, she walked into Parsons School of Design to enrol in photography classes. Condé Nast had been at Parsons delivering a lecture to the fashion students and he'd seen her, as

poignant as any Madonna, he would say later when he told the fantastical story, her brown eyes wet with tears from a month of weeping. The rest, as they say, was Jess's history.

Now, Condé released her from his embrace, told her that she was still his favourite model and commanded her to enjoy herself.

Which was not going to be difficult, she supposed, when the bar was fully stocked with impossible-to-get French champagne – a man like Condé probably had a cellar big enough to outlast the war – when everyone around them was attired in expensive gowns, when the air smelled heavy with French perfume. The orchestra played Cole Porter, George Gershwin sat at a table chatting to a group of admirers, overladen buffets were set up, as usual, on the terrace under the forgivingly warm fall sky, and the dancers took up most of the space in the room. Dancers, Jess noted, who included Emile, almost lip to lip with a girl she knew, another model, four years younger than Jess, barely eighteen. She waited for jealousy to swirl through her but she felt, if anything, relieved. She sat at a table, lit a cigarette and heard a woman say her name.

'Martha Gellhorn,' Jess replied with a grin.

'I see my fame goes before me,' Martha said with a wry smile, sitting beside Jess and lighting a cigarette too. 'Which you must also be used to.'

'Perhaps not as much as Ernest Hemingway's wife,' Jess said. 'Does it make your blood boil every time they call you that?'

Martha laughed. 'I've considered wearing a label that lists my other achievements but few seem interested.'

Jess shook her head; she knew that although Martha was one of the few women – perhaps the only woman – reporting on the war from Europe, her single biggest claim to fame in most people's eyes was as Ernest Hemingway's other half.

'I've read all of your pieces,' Jess said. 'I can't say that I enjoyed them because nobody could enjoy stories of war and death, but I appreciated them.'

'I've read yours too.' Martha eyed Jess appraisingly. 'And seen your photographs. The one you took of the artist's canvas sitting beside the propaganda posters she now paints was better than any newspaper report. I like the way you blurred one image into the other –'

'Solarisation,' Jess explained. 'I wanted to make it look like one painting was literally bleeding into the other.'

Martha nodded. 'I thought that might have been it. It was the subtlest commentary; you didn't need words to explain the conundrum: the wish to appear selfless and donate one's talents to one's country at the same time as mourning the loss of true art.'

'Thank you.' Jess felt herself blush, which was something she hadn't done in a very long time.

'What are you working on now?' Martha asked, sipping whiskey rather than champagne.

'That's a very good question. Besides asking my paramour to move out,' Jess nodded at Emile, 'not much.'

'I heard about his hand,' Martha said without sympathy. 'I also heard that if it hadn't been for his hand –'

'I'd probably have asked him to move out a long time ago.' Jess finished the sentence for her.

'So why don't you look happier? I believe you used to be quite something of a couple – like Hem and I – but wasn't that a while ago?'

'Jessica May and Emile Robard. Model and photographer. Bohemian artistes,' Jess mused.

'You're selling yourself a little short by calling yourself a model. From what I've seen, you're as good a photographer as he is. You've had work published.'

'It's what everyone thinks. See.' Jess reached out and opened the newspaper on the sideboard to the social pages, pointing to a picture from a party two nights ago. *Celebrated photographer Emile Robard with Jessica May, model*. 'Apparently I'm not even celebrated,' she said with a sardonic smile. 'The thing is, only this morning I was thinking that I didn't know how much longer I could parade around in dresses and

smile at cameras. You're doing something useful,' she said to Martha. 'What am I doing?'

'Keeping up morale?' Martha said teasingly. 'I bet there's a soldier or two who has a picture of you posted above his bed in his training camp.'

Jess rolled her eyes. 'Just what I want to be remembered for.'

'There you are.' Bel joined them, kissing both Jess's and Martha's cheeks.

'You look as frowny as I feel,' Jess noted as Belinda sat down.

'You never look frowny, Jessica May,' Bel said. 'You two look as if you're having the most interesting conversation at this party.'

'Cheers to that,' Martha said, raising her glass.

'Maybe we can wipe your frown away,' Jess said to Bel. 'A problem shared and all that.'

Bel took a sip of champagne. 'I spent the afternoon foxtrotting with the government. The price of paper has gone sky high since the war started, and they're talking about paper rationing. I need to stay on the good side of the politicians if I want to keep *Vogue* alive during the war. But during today's meeting, I was asked if I could do more to contribute to the war effort than it's felt we're currently doing.'

'I take it by "asked" you mean "blackmailed"?' Jess said.

'Exactly. I told the government that women are a valuable part of the propaganda machine and that *Vogue* can and should help with that. The government wants women here to let their men go and fight, to shrug off rationing as their moral duty, to work in order to keep the economy going. And *Vogue*'s market is the women the government wants on their side. But I need pictures, not just words; *Vogue* is visual. I don't suppose you'd quit *Collier's* and come work for me?' Bel said pleadingly to Martha.

As Bel spoke, an idea at once so outrageous and so perfect began to form in Jess's mind. Four years ago in Paris, when she'd joined the anti-fascism demonstrations, she would never have imagined that, in the near future, while fascism claimed life after life and country

after country, she would be sitting at a party in a Park Avenue penthouse drinking champagne. Back then she had marched and she had protested and, most of all, she had cared deeply about what was happening in the world. She still cared, but in a helpless and hopeless way. Writing and photographing those pieces for Bel had re-inflamed that care and given her a sense that she could do something more, like Martha did. Jess couldn't shoot or fly or fight but she could write and she could photograph.

Martha leaned back in her chair, pointed her cigarette in Jess's direction and said exactly what Jess was thinking. 'You don't need me,' Martha said. 'You've got Jess.'

'Yes. Send me,' Jess said, turning to Bel as her restlessness fell away, replaced by an animation she hadn't felt for a long time.

Bel laughed. 'I appreciate you trying to cheer me up but –'

'I'm serious.' Jess put down her glass and eyeballed Bel. 'I can be *Vogue*'s correspondent.'

'I'm not sending you into a war zone. It's ridiculous.' Bel took a large sip of champagne, then said, 'Brilliant, but ridiculous.'

Jess felt the chink in Bel's Mainbocher armour. 'It *is* brilliant. And I'm *asking* to go into a war zone; you're not sending me. There are other women over there.'

Bel arched her eyebrows. 'About two of them.'

'So with me, there'll be three. Lucky number three.'

'Actually, you're about right,' Martha said. 'Margaret Bourke-White's the only female photojournalist I know of in the Mediterranean. There are a couple of other correspondents like me. But that's all.'

This time, Bel's eyebrows performed such a feat of acrobatics that Jess had to stifle a laugh. 'I was joking when I said two!' Bel protested.

'I want to do this.' Jess kept her voice level. 'I *need* to do this. Please.'

Bel gesticulated at the waiter for more champagne. 'How on earth am I going to get you accredited? Former model, Emile's lover – or

are you? I can see he's finding comfort in another girl's lips just over there – unconventional as all get-out. I've heard the woman at the passport office is as easy to get past as Hitler. She's never going to let a model, who I'm sure she imagines will sleep only on silk sheets at the finest hotels, go to a war zone.'

'You're selling me short,' Jess said. 'You know what my childhood was like, that I've lived in tents, slept under the stars, roughed it in a way that probably most of the men going to war couldn't even imagine.'

'When I landed in Spain in '37 to report the war over there, I'd never slept in a tent,' Martha added. 'Or seen a man shot. I survived. Best way to learn is to throw yourself into the thick of it, bombs and all.'

Bel inhaled smoke, breathed it out, inhaled again. 'If only you weren't so damn right,' she said to Jess. 'You *would* be perfect. And I've always known you wouldn't be a model forever.' She reached out and squeezed Jess's hand. 'Martha, you've been over there. Shouldn't I try harder to dissuade her?'

'On the contrary,' Martha replied. 'If you do, we'll only hear stories of men, told by men. Given I'm married to the biggest chauvinist in the country, I have a vested interest in opening up the discourse.'

'You're the only person in the world who would make me feel like I was doing her a favour if I said yes to sending her into a war zone,' Bel said to Jess.

'Let's try,' Jess said. 'We can only fail spectacularly.'

Two

We can only fail spectacularly. The words rang in Jess's mind as she sat, in early 1943 – bureaucracy was unfamiliar with the concept of speed – at the State Department offices for one of the meetings that would decide her future. *Remove all objections,* she told herself as she stared at the ticking clock, more nervous than she'd ever been at any go-see.

At a go-see, she knew there was nothing she could do that hadn't already been done. Her portfolio had been shot, she had the face and body that she'd been blessed with – dark brown eyes that every photographer she'd ever worked with said they could never do justice to, naturally waving blonde hair that sat a couple of inches above her shoulders, and a figure that had curves in all the right places. But, with this interview at the State Department, everything depended on what she said, not on the way she looked. Perhaps on the way she smiled too – how much would be too much in the eyes of a woman holding all the power to grant Jess a passport to Europe?

Stop it, she told herself, studying the demure and practical Stella Designs black crepe tuxedo trousers and the prim and subdued white cotton shirt she'd paired them with – Stella too, because only Stella

shirts came with the white peony over the left breast, which made the outfit more like herself than the person she was pretending to be.

'Miss Jessica May,' a voice called out.

Jessica stood, straightened her back and then realised she was striding down the hall like a model on a catwalk. She tried to correct herself but then couldn't remember how to walk normally so, in the end, she marched on, hoping to God they'd think she had military precision rather than modelistic pretensions.

'You may sit.' A tall woman – tall enough to have been a damn good model – gestured to a chair.

Jess sat down, and arranged her face in a way that she hoped indicated strength, hardiness and determination.

'I thought I should explain myself,' she began. 'I know I must seem an unusual candidate for a passport to Europe to work as a photojournalist. But I possess many advantages that I'm sure some of the men currently over there reporting the war do not. My parents were paleobotanists, you see, and I led a somewhat peripatetic childhood. We followed plant fossils around the world; I lived in or visited South America, the northern territories of Australia, Tahiti and then we made our way to Europe after my parents' work began to receive recognition. I lived in France for ten years; I speak the language fluently.' She felt her voice relax as she spoke, confident of her bona fides.

She went on. 'As soon as I was old enough, I became my parents' photographer every summer and often during term time; if they thought they were on the trail of a discovery, my parents would simply take me along, put the Rolleiflex in my hand and ask me to capture whatever they'd found. Since then, I've studied at Parsons and received more training in photography from Emile Robard.'

As she spoke, images appeared and disappeared in her mind like a shutter opening and closing: fern fossils fronding delicately over rock, cotyledons puncturing the surface of a stone, the barest tracing of Zamites leaves carved into limestone. And then pictures

of herself, very few, taken on the rare occasions her mother picked up the camera, showing a Jessica yet to grow into her gangly limbs and too-large smile, her blonde hair a ferocious tangle down her back, skin tanned to a then-unfashionable brownness, nose freckled by the sun.

More snapshots: Jess playing in mud, scrambling over rocks until her kneecaps were bereft of skin, swimming in the lakes and rivers even though her parents were warned about parasites and crocodiles. Her mother wearing a floppy hat, stained by mud and dust, grinning at Jess. Happy, always so happy to have her hands in the dirt, to prise away stories of a time long past, to clatter out papers and findings on the old typewriter. And her father, the quieter of the two, not quite of this world, his head always in the past, dreaming, perhaps imagining Ginkgoales into being.

It was an unorthodox childhood of intermittent schooling, of having to grasp German, Italian and French; she had to either learn the language or be excluded from playing with the other children during the short spells she had at various schools. Her education was propped up by as much reading as her parents were able to obtain books to supply. And so Jess's life had formed from two seemingly opposite sources: the mysteries of what the ground held and the stories recorded in books. Which meant she'd always done well at English, History and Science but had never had any interest in or flair for Mathematics.

'May I speak?' The woman's voice was smoothly polite and Jess blinked, shutting out the past and cursing herself for being so distracted.

'Europe is at war; you've photographed plants,' the woman stated.

Jess realised that she hadn't even waited for the woman to introduce herself; that she'd barged in and, rather than confidently stating her qualifications, probably arrogantly confirmed everything the woman might assume about models – that they were used to having the floor and thought far too highly of themselves.

'I'm sorry,' she apologised. Should she admit to nerves? They'd hardly send someone into a war zone if they suffered from nerves in an office in broad daylight. 'I've photographed more than plants. I had some pictures and articles published in French *Vogue* in 1939, showing the exodus of Americans out of Paris. American *Vogue* have also published my work about female camouflage and propaganda artists.'

Jess stopped speaking. She waited. And waited. And waited.

She was used to being appraised; she couldn't walk into a party or a club without feeling dozens of pairs of eyes wash over her. But this was different. This was scrutiny of a kind so intense she could feel herself melting back into her chair, looking down at her lap, not wanting the woman to find anything within her that made her the wrong choice of person to be granted a passport.

'It is not my goal to allow women into a war zone.' The woman said it matter-of-factly, politely even. But her words were a boot pushing down on the back of Jess's neck, telling her that she should stay where she was, doing what she was doing; that being a clothes hanger with a nice smile was the right job for her.

Jess matched the woman's pragmatic tone of voice. 'I speak German. Not fluently, but certainly well enough to make myself understood, and to understand what's being said. I also speak Italian. I wonder if you can tell me the names of any men you've given passports to in order to report the war who can speak French, German and Italian?'

The woman didn't shift her gaze. 'I cannot,' she said.

And there it was, a tiny advantage, but an advantage nonetheless.

The woman finally let go of Jess's eyes. 'I will inform your editor at *Vogue* of my decision. It will take some time.'

She'd been dismissed. She'd either given it her best shot or her worst; it was hard to tell. If this didn't work, she'd be back in a field, if she was lucky, or on a beach, or outside a steel-grey skyscraper wearing next season's clothes, smiling as if she were happy,

as unremarkable as a Jurassic fern leaf imprinted into volcanic rock by the years and then long forgotten.

Two months later she got her passport. The year was marching on and Jess had achieved nothing except to substantially reduce her savings, living off house model work for companies like Stella Designs. It was lucky she had her parents' apartment and didn't have to pay rent.

Then she had to be screened by the War Department's Bureau of Public Relations Overseas Liaison Branch, who had the power to accredit her as a correspondent. Or not. Just getting the appointment took another month. And if she'd thought her parents were particularly skilled at uncovering secrets that the earth tried to hold on to, nothing prepared Jess for the rigour of the War Department. Martha had forewarned her. 'By the time they've finished with you, you'll feel like you're sitting in front of them in your underwear.'

Which she did. They showed her a photograph of her mother; Jess couldn't imagine how they'd got hold of it but, that night, when she returned to her apartment and looked through her boxes, it wasn't in her photo album, which only proved that Emile was more of a bastard than she'd realised.

Just as she'd done the day she and Emile stepped off their ship in New York City to be greeted by the news of her parents' death, Jess sat on the floor of the Greenwich Village apartment, weeping. Back then, she'd been watched over by the angelic forms of dust sheets and the brooding presence of Emile, standing in the doorway, not knowing what to do. Now she was alone. She hadn't wept for such a long time. But seeing the photograph of her mother, knowing that she and her father and botany had never been enough for her, if what the War Department had said was true, brought back the grief.

Then she heard the ghost of her mother's voice telling her to be practical, to stand up, to not wallow. To not let the War Department

get to her. So, just as her mother had always been the one to find the best camping spot, to give everyone errands so that food would be cooked and supplies purchased, Jess scrubbed her cheeks dry with a Kleenex and took out her own supplies.

To start with, the Rolleiflex her mother had given her. Then she hunted around for the Leica Emile had bought for her birthday their first year in Manhattan. She preferred the Rollei but knew it would be an advantage to take two cameras with her.

She ran her hand over her typewriter; it had been her mother's. Each night of her childhood, Jess had fallen asleep to the sound of keys striking paper, the lullaby of her youth. It wouldn't do for Europe though. A baby Hermes would be just the ticket. How much paper could she feasibly take? Martha had said there were shortages across Europe. She made herself keep thinking along those lines – as if she was going – because the idea that she might have to stay working as a house model, waiting for advertisers to consent to her returning to the pages of magazines, had become unbearable.

A knock at the door startled her and she opened it to find Bel bearing a pot of soup and a bottle of wine.

'The last supper,' Bel said cheerily as she made her way into the kitchen. 'I thought if we acted it out, it might come true.'

Jess managed a smile and took bowls and glasses out of the cupboard, then hugged her friend. 'Thank you. What the hell will I do in Europe without you?'

'You'll find someone. You're the kind of girl who always lands on her feet.' Bel put the soup on the stove and they sat at the kitchen table, waiting for it to warm. 'How did it go?' Bel asked shrewdly, studying Jess's face.

Jess reached for a cigarette. 'As badly as Martha said it would.' She hesitated. 'They showed me a picture of my mother. I took it in a club in Montmartre during one of my parents' rare visits out of the field and into civilisation. I was at boarding school there and they picked me up on their way out for the night; I don't think it

ever occurred to them that Montmartre jazz clubs weren't really the place for sixteen-year-old girls.'

Bel smiled. 'Sounds like your parents were the kind every sixteen-year-old thought they wanted. I imagine the reality was a little different.'

'I didn't think so at the time but now . . .' Jess pictured the photograph. Her mother sitting at a table in the club in the centre of a group of artistes, having always been a part of that circle; her college training had been in illustration and drawing as well as botany. In the background, her father stood by the bar, watching her mother as if she was the most precious thing in the world. He always sat at the edges, eyes fixed to her mother's face, content to listen and admire. Jess used to sit with him until, later, it transpired that Jess could tell a better story than anyone – or so she'd thought at the time – and she took her place at the table. She'd soon understood that her moving into the centre actually coincided with her growing into her body and into her smile rather than her abilities as a raconteur.

'I had my first gin when I was fifteen,' Jess said to Bel, inhaling smoke deep into her lungs. 'My first kiss that same night, and you could say that I quenched my curiosity of all things sexual by the time I was seventeen. My parents were either oblivious or had a different moral compass to most – I've never been sure – although I'm fairly certain my mother wasn't faithful to my father.'

'Which the War Department was only too happy to confirm,' Bel said slowly, piecing together the story of what had happened that morning.

Jess nodded. 'They listed the names of men my mother had had affairs with. And they listed the names of men I was suspected of sleeping with. They were trying to establish a pattern, they said. A pattern of licentiousness that would preclude me from ever being let loose among an army of men. Of course, their list of my paramours was long and hugely exaggerated.'

'So you're not going?'

'I don't know. I told them . . .' She hesitated, wondering now how she'd ever had the bravado to retaliate when all she'd wanted to do was cry, because the irony of it all was that Jess might have lived openly with a man for three years but it was only one man; she would never cheat on anyone, no matter what the War Department thought.

'I hope you said something typically Jessica May and left their filthy mouths hanging open.' Bel reached across the table for Jess's hand.

Something typically Jessica May. It was the first time, sitting in the War Department offices, that she'd ever wanted to be anything other than typically Jessica May. But why should she change for a group of condescending men?

'I said,' Jess stood theatrically, hand on hip, '"My, my, it's a wonder I have any energy left to apply to be a correspondent. Do you provide the men who apply with a list of their conquests? Or is that something you all drink to at the bar later? Perhaps I might write about this *screening process* for *Vogue*, seeing as how I apparently don't have a reputation left to lose."'

Bel laughed. 'Bravo!'

Jess walked over to the stove to stir the soup. Of course she'd been dismissed after that, her threat hanging in the air like cheap perfume, tawdry but essential; if she capitulated, then how would she ever survive in the European Theatre of Operations?

'Sometimes I feel like I'm always saying goodbye,' Jess said suddenly, back turned to Bel. 'It's one of the things I remember about growing up. That I had to be funny and fabulous so I'd make friends and then, once I'd made the friends, we'd leave. Even when I was at boarding school in Paris, my parents would pull me out every few weeks when they needed photographs taken. Then I'd come back and, even though it was the same school, it was like starting again.'

Starting again. Which was what she'd be doing now if she was ever accredited by the War Department.

She continued. 'There's just one girl, Amelia – she was English – who I still write to. Her parents had left her at school when she was seven and she'd only seen them twice in nine years. We bonded over a certain kind of parental ignorance, although our parents were nothing alike. Her father was in the army and always away somewhere. My father had the social skills of a mollusc, so my mother thought that taking me to all their parties would teach me both how to look after myself and how to win people over.'

'Did it work?' Bel asked with a trace of irony.

'I won you over, didn't I?' Jess teased, facing her friend and pushing the past back down to where it belonged.

She ladled soup into bowls and pushed a pile of clippings across the table towards Bel. 'Martha told me to read these. Ruth Cowan and Inez Robb got themselves assigned to the WACs – the Women's Army Corp – in North Africa and they've been reporting from there. About what it's like to have to wear trousers instead of skirts and the trials of only going to the hair salon every few months. In this one,' Jess pointed to a page, 'Cowan even says she'd prefer to have a bomb fall on her than share a ditch with a spider. I wonder if any of those things cross the minds of the soldiers out there? Every one of their by-lines carries the words "Girl Reporter". If you put that on any of my pieces I'll never speak to you again.'

'What are they going to do with you if you do get yourself over there?' Bel said, shaking her head and starting to laugh. 'I'd hate to be the first man to try calling *you* a girl reporter. Don't forget you're probably subject to military law so you might have to eat your words occasionally. Although I can't imagine how a woman who had her first kiss at age fifteen will tolerate censorship.'

'My plan is not to kiss anybody while I'm away,' Jess informed her primly. 'If I do, then I just reinforce every suspicion they already have about me. I'm sure they're itching for me to seduce an entire division of the US Army. I'm not planning to give them the satisfaction.'

'Sounds like you won't be having any satisfaction while you're away, then.' Bel grinned, and that did it.

Jess felt her eyes tear up and her throat tighten. 'I think Emile has cured me of wanting that kind of satisfaction for a good while.'

'I wanted to make you laugh,' Bel said. 'Don't cry. The formidable Jessica May does not cry. Even when our art director excoriated you in front of a whole team of graphic designers for framing a picture with too much surrealist ambition, I never saw you cry.'

Jess gave a small laugh and wiped her eyes, hoping to wipe away all thoughts of Emile. 'I'd forgotten about that,' she said to Bel. 'That was the day you told me you were going to run my first piece. We went and drank too much champagne at the Stork Club afterwards.'

'And here you are now, waiting to take more photos and write a whole lot more pieces about a war.'

'Perhaps it pays to be publicly excoriated and then to go out and get drunk.'

'Sounds like a motto that might hold you in good stead for the next couple of years.' Bel hugged Jess. 'I'm going to miss you. *When* you go. Not if. When.'

Three

The War Department did let her go. Thankfully, the Condé Nast empire's influence was vast. They made Jess cut her teeth on some home-front reporting of the training of WACs, which *Vogue* published, and when she managed to do that to everyone's satisfaction, she was finally given orders to go overseas, not long after her twenty-third birthday.

Thus she became a captain in the US Army – her rank and uniform a courtesy meant only to provide camouflage and to stop her being shot as a spy if she was captured. She was inoculated against tetanus, typhoid and typhus, and given a card from the Adjutant General's Office of the War Department showing her fingerprints and stating her birth date, hair colour, eye colour, height, weight, and including a photograph of her looking stunned – it would never make it into the pages of *Vogue*, she thought with a smile. She kitted herself out in trousers – she packed the two skirts they thrust on her but doubted if skirts and combat zones were a terribly good combination – two men's army shirts, a tie, her pinks and a green US War Correspondent patch for her jacket and cap.

Her embarkation point was in Brooklyn, where a sergeant looked her over and said, 'Virgin?'

Jess couldn't help laughing. 'Only in matters of war,' she replied smoothly and saw every visible piece of his skin flush bright red.

He led her to a warehouse, punishing her with silence for turning his attempt to embarrass her back on him. She was issued a musette bag, a canteen, a helmet, sunglasses that she surreptitiously slipped back into the pile – she knew from being out with her parents that her sunglasses were probably better than anything the United States Army could issue her with. Next came insect powder, which she was used to from paleobotany expeditions, chocolate, mosquito netting and gloves. She added the items to everything she'd brought with her: socks, underwear, cold cream, lipstick and powder, her two cameras, film, lenses, flash bulbs, repair parts, and typewriter paper. Plus a Stella Designs dress, made especially for her by Estella Bissette, from the lightest silk, which folded down to fit into the palm of her hand. Thankfully she'd been allowed to have her Hermes baby typewriter go as an extra piece of baggage, rather than having to fit that into her bag as well.

She'd done her homework and asked to go to Italy where the nurses, she'd been told, were closer to the front than they'd been in any other war. As a woman, Jess wasn't allowed to cover the actual war. Just the ancillaries. So her destination was Naples, recently liberated by the US Army, and her orders were to record the work of the nurses for the readers of *Vogue*.

In Naples, the Public Relations Officer – or PRO – a man she discovered she'd have to mollify despite the papers in her hand, let her cool her heels for a fortnight while he verified that her orders were real and that some *damn fool in Washington* had actually let a woman come to Italy to report on the Medical Corps and that Stone, *the damn fool PRO in London* – hadn't warned him about it.

'You can go out to the Eleventh Field Hospital,' he told her at last. 'But you'll have to wait until someone's heading that way. I don't have a jeep for you.'

'Where do you suggest I wait?' she enquired coolly. 'By the side of the road with my thumb out? Or does the US Army have a more orderly approach to hitchhiking?'

'If I were you,' he said evenly, 'I'd concentrate on keeping myself safe. Women are absolutely *not* allowed near a combat zone. I'm not taking any shit if you get yourself hurt.'

How exactly does one stay safe when one is taken to an area that is supposed to be out of the combat zone, but which turns out to be the scene of a conflagration?

In Naples, on the dance floor at the Orange Club, Jess had learned that the Eleventh Field Hospital was near Mignano on the ridge of hills surrounding the Cassino Valley. It had sounded lovely but, in a jeep that had come to a sudden halt in the place where the field hospital should be, there was nothing lovely: only sound beyond anything she'd ever imagined, so loud that she couldn't distinguish individual noises but rather one catastrophic roar, like a gargantuan lion provoked.

The drive north from Naples had given her no indication of what she was heading into. She'd sat in the jeep, which had the floor sandbagged to minimise the effect of any mines they might drive over, one of a constant stream of olive-coloured vehicles – tanks, trucks, ambulances, command cars with names like Black Devil and Death Dodger painted on them. They passed tent camps that stretched for miles in a sea of mud, dotted with soldiers stripped to the waist, shaving. Mounds of rubble that must once have been villages; occasionally they passed a pink wall still standing. Italian women washing clothes in troughs because laundry still had to be done even in the midst of war. Coils of communications wire that stretched on as if the veins of the earth were unexpectedly and horribly on display. Children playing in wrecked munitions carriers.

And then, suddenly and magnificently in front of her stood the mountains, snow-capped and wild, perforating the sky. The peaks rose above a valley from which white puffs of smoke erupted, the scars of shells gouging the once beautiful land, artillery tracks making a crazed, circular pattern. The view was obliterated a moment later by the rain that had been threatening. It came in thick and grey, engulfing everything.

Immediately afterwards, the driver skidded to a halt. They'd rounded a bend and found a battle instead of a hospital. The sound became something Jess heard not only in her ears but all through her body, thudding on irresolutely like a secondary, even a tertiary heartbeat. A sound she couldn't escape from and could hardly bear, such was the pressure of it in her head and her chest. The driver made to turn the car around but Jess opened the door of the jeep – Rollei around her neck, Leica in hand – and jumped out before he could stop her.

'You should help them,' she cried when the driver hesitated. To her, it looked as if the soldiers on their side were capable of nothing more than defence in the face of what was being thrown and shot and hurled at them.

He hopped out too and hit the ground, diving straight into a mud so viscous it was hard to believe solid ground could exist anywhere beneath the mire. 'Stay by the car,' he ordered, clambering across the ground, the camouflage patterns on his uniform no longer needed because his whole body was now covered in clay.

'Stay by the car?' Jess shouted. It was a ridiculous command; the car was exposed. A horrific scream that seemed to be right above her head had her instinctively mimicking the driver: making for the ground as fast as she could. By sheer luck, she fell into a ditch, which provided a semblance of cover and she thanked God that the person there wore an American uniform rather than a German one.

'What the hell are you doing here?' the owner of the uniform barked.

'This was supposed to be a field hospital,' Jess snapped back. 'He,' Jess indicated the driver, who was hunched over a couple of feet away in the same ditch, 'was meant to know where we were going.'

'If he's come from Naples, then he doesn't know shit. It *was* a field hospital. It was evacuated last night.' The GI, whose rank insignia proclaimed him a captain, raised his head and fired his gun into the blindness in front of them.

Jess crouched where she was, unmoving. It was inconceivable that this was battle: a huddle of men in a boggy ditch popping their heads up every few seconds to shoot in the general direction from which a cannonade of machine gun fire emanated. And she knew, as surely as the fact that she could actually die at any moment, that she'd been a damn fool. She hadn't thought about what armed conflict would be like. She'd understood she'd be roughing it, that her accommodations would likely be tents, that there would be no luxuries. But she'd been so busy fighting to get herself here that she hadn't stopped to imagine how it would feel to be in range of enemy bullets. Because she wasn't supposed to be in range of enemy bullets.

Thank God for the noise and the physical echo of the sound inside her body. It deafened her to the usual physical reactions to fear; she couldn't feel her heart or her breath and whether both were faster than usual, she couldn't even comprehend that she had hands, let alone that they might be sweating. Her eyes were almost the only thing that seemed to be within her control and she tried to fix her gaze on one thing, rather than everything. As she did so, she realised that she was the only one in the hole who was frozen; none of the men looked scared. After their first flicker of surprise at seeing she was a woman, each one had settled back into a state that looked a lot like resignation. Which meant they'd done this before. Too many times. And they'd survived or else they wouldn't be here. It gave her hope.

She concentrated on her fingers. They responded to her thoughts, flexing, and she remembered the cameras in her hands. She flicked

the Leica around her back and lifted the Rollei. *Look through the lens*, she told herself. A camera reduced things to the size of a frame and she could certainly do with the chaos being minimised in some way.

Her mind was functioning enough for her to know that it would be lethal to move suddenly or distract the attention of the American soldiers. But the benefit of a twin lens reflex like the Rollei was that she shot from the waist and could be unobtrusive. The captain was too close to her for perfect focus but, rather than fiddling with the focusing knob, she leaned back a little, allowing her position to focus the shot. Then, while he shot bullets at a small posse of German soldiers she could just make out when she lifted her head to the edge of the ditch, she shot photographs.

Focus, shoot. Focus, shoot. She repeated the words over and over in her head. And she concentrated on deliberately blurring the background of each picture so that the flashes of light from the bullets or shells or God only knew what were rendered flamelike, dancing around the captain's hands, which were so rigid and black with dirt they almost appeared to be a part of the gun they held.

How does one grow accustomed to the noise, she wondered as she at last began to discern individual sounds within the roar: a sudden loud shriek and bellow, which made her flinch, followed by the earth lifting into the air and then raining down just a few feet away as the jeep, with most of her belongings in it, blew up.

After a time, the rain cleared enough for Jess to see that the Germans were far closer than she'd realised – thank God she hadn't noticed that when she'd first landed in the hole or she might never have found a way through the terror. They looked bewildered, not at all like the devilish beings she'd imagined them to be. In fact, they seemed just like the captain next to her: youngish, mid-twenties perhaps, filthy, tired, wet, caked in mud and oblivious to anything other than the sighting and shooting of an enemy.

Then the captain began to make a series of complicated hand gestures – which she gathered were a way of communicating through the noise – to the other soldiers, and she saw some of them climb out and race a hundred yards forward before disappearing into another ditch. She lifted her head up just enough to record their flight on her camera.

'You can't do that!' the captain yelled.

'Why the hell not?' she retorted. If he stopped her from taking pictures then she would have nothing to distract her from the still-terrifying reality of being in the Nazis' line of fire. Like a reflex, her body defaulted to the wit and the smile that had always got her what she wanted, and she was once again amazed at how she was still able to function amidst the inferno. 'Stop worrying about me,' she said. 'I'm much less deadly than the Germans.'

She thought she saw a flicker of a smile; at any rate, he turned his attention away from her and back to the exploding stars that burst into life and flickered out before them, into the smoke, thicker than any fog rolling up the Hudson, into the choking smog of earth and ammunition and adrenaline that hung in the air.

Who knew how long she crouched there, recording every moment first with the Rolleiflex and then, when it only had one shot left – which she wanted to save – with the Leica. In between bouts of fire, the GIs wisecracked to one another, finding time to light cigarettes from the ubiquitous white and red packs of Lucky Strikes. She remembered reading one of Martha's articles about Spain in which she'd said that you couldn't wait forever for the shell to fall on you; you couldn't cower in expectation of death all day. Watching the men around her, Jess understood what those words meant.

Then, just as she had the Leica lined up, her finger depressing the button, she saw, through the viewfinder, a man in a German uniform fall, the consequence of a shot from her partner's gun. The captain didn't react, just lined up the next one and shot him, too. The men died, not gloriously, not spectacularly and certainly

without anyone to mourn them, disappearing into the mud beneath their feet. Two lives had just ended, one of them was frozen in time inside her camera. She didn't know how she would bring herself to look at that negative, didn't know that she could ever allow herself to discover exactly what it meant to die.

She was supposed to be glad; two fewer Germans was a good thing for her country. But how could anyone be glad of a boy dying alone, an unthought-of consequence in this grand mess called war?

'I need to send you out with the medics,' her companion said a while later when the shooting had lessened and the men were drinking from their canteens.

'Where are the medics?' Jess asked. 'All the noise has mixed my head up into jigsaw pieces. It's my first day on the job – and I'm not saying that for sympathy, but by way of explanation.'

'Explanation accepted and no sympathy given.'

'How long has it been like this?' she asked, indicating the mud and the rain, knowing her job was to get answers to go with her pictures, and that conversation was, like the Rollei, a good diversion from fear.

The captain rubbed his temple tiredly. 'Weeks. Since we arrived in September. Apparently nobody thought to check what an Italian winter was like.'

He was a veteran, then. Very few US Army units had served in Europe, but he'd already done two months in Italy. His words reminded Jess of her father who, like the people who hadn't understood what havoc Italian rain could wreak, was always the one wanting to go to faraway places in winter, who never considered the weather, who would never remember where exactly they'd pitched the tent. It was as if men like her father were running the war, although that probably wasn't fair. It was just that, out here in slime and sludge that roiled around them like a living thing, in rain like

nothing seen since the time of Noah, in the midst of men who were alive one minute and dead the next, organisation must be impossible. And Jess thanked God that she wasn't a dumb debutante model like they all thought, that she was her mother's child, that she had learned from a young age to organise herself amidst the worst kind of shambles.

'What?' he asked, studying her face.

'I was just being thankful for being caught in a hurricane in Tahiti when I was six. It wasn't as bad as this, but . . .' she shrugged.

'Tahiti?' he asked, eyebrows raised.

'Tahiti,' she repeated.

'Sure as shit would give anything to be there now,' he said. 'Hurricane and all. Let's go.'

Jess began to stand, to revive her cramped legs, but immediately ducked upon hearing the whistling sound she'd come to realise preceded a shell explosion.

'No need to duck,' he said. 'That one's ours. We try not to hit ourselves too often.'

'How can you tell?'

'Listen,' he said, cocking his ear as if they were straining to hear when in fact it was impossible to do anything else. 'If you hear the whistle first and then the thump, it's theirs. Thump first, echo after is ours. You learn to tell a thump from a whistle from an echo pretty damn quick. We're heading for that foxhole over there. Should be a medic inside. You'll be okay.' He glanced up at the sky as if he had the power to stop shells from falling in their vicinity during the time it took them to scramble to the back of the line.

Jess was thankful for the mini-lesson on the intricacies of shells. There was so damn much she didn't know. But Martha had said that she knew nothing about war when she arrived in Spain in 1937. And Martha had survived and learned from men like the one beside Jess now and done a damn good job. It wasn't in Jessica May's make-up to give up after one frightening encounter. But she said

none of this to the captain as they hurried along, although hurried was the wrong word – the ground was so slippery she was terrified of falling over and ruining her film, if not her pride.

'Wouldn't it be easier to slide along on our stomachs like penguins?' she asked at one point after she'd had to drop her pride and grab his arm just in time to save herself from landing face first in the slime.

He laughed. 'It probably would be.'

They found the medic and the scramble continued to a point even further back, where a jeep was parked. An injured man was laid in the back and the captain climbed in after Jess.

'You don't have to escort me,' she said.

'Jerry's retreated for now. Won't be back till tomorrow if we're lucky. I can spare half an hour. Besides, if anyone finds out I had a woman in my foxhole and didn't deliver her to a point out of shooting range, then I'll be serving as a private in a company in a training camp rather than running a company in the field. And yes,' he grinned, 'there are so many jokes you could make about what I just said that it's hard to know where to start.'

She burst out laughing. If anyone had said to Jess that it was possible to smile or laugh at the most dangerous moment one had ever faced in one's life, she wouldn't have believed them. But now she saw that was all you could do to get through; that on the other side of jocularity lay despair and nobody could afford to waste a single moment on that out here otherwise they might as well run without a weapon straight into the open arms of the Germans.

It was only a short drive to the field hospital, which was altogether too fine a word to describe the tents, the stretchers, the bodies, the stink of mud and flesh, the too few people unloading the ambulances with the too many bodies. 'Flick!' he called to a woman who'd come out to check over the wounded men in their vehicle, 'Can you take Captain . . .' He stopped.

'Oh, Jessica May. Lovely to meet you,' she quipped, holding out a filthy hand for him to shake.

Before he could reply, Flick accosted him. 'Where've you been hiding, stranger?' She gave him the kind of easy smile that suggested they'd done more than share war stories.

And Jess knew it was why she'd saved that one shot on the Rollei – for just such a moment. She took it. The grubby officer looking back over his shoulder to the battle he'd left, to the men he probably needed to check on, and the nurse gazing up at him with adoration.

That night at the Eleventh Field Hospital was almost worse than the battlefield. The Germans controlled the high ground of the mountains, and the hospital was within shelling range, the place of greater safety it had moved to proving only to be the better of two bad choices, rather than a sensible position.

Within minutes of her arrival, Flick had shown Jess a spare cot in a tent with five other nurses, the cot only available because the nurse who'd once occupied it was now a patient. That was the cost of having nurses closer to the front line than they'd ever been in any other war but it was counterbalanced by the fact that they could have a man in the shock tent and hooked up to life-saving plasma within one hour rather than five.

Jess was lucky enough to cadge a roll of film for her Leica from the supply store – someone had died with it on them and nobody else had a use for it. But that was the only piece of luck in one long and unlucky day as the Germans began to toss shells at the hospital with deadly intensity.

'Never shelled us before,' Anne, a nurse – a small woman who looked as if she would hardly be able to help lift a stretcher but here she was, carrying the weight of every injured man's survival on her

tiny shoulders – said grimly to Jess. 'First time we thought it was an accident. Now we think Jerry means it.'

And Jerry did mean it. Before long, a shell made a direct hit on the mess tent, leaving a stew of ration boxes, canned eggs, salted peanuts and onions embedded in the mud. It was fortunately empty of people at the time but the result was that the electrical system, which had been wired through the mess tent, went out and the night continued on through the beams of flashlights.

So Jess found herself in an operating theatre holding one of the flashlights when all other hands were busy, watching doctors operate with their boots covered in mud, their surgical gowns covered in blood. Jess's camera caught them as she concentrated once more on looking only through the frame; it was the best way to keep her stomach calm. And she had to stay calm because what did anyone back in America know of any of this?

Of exactly what a mortar could do to a leg, tearing away flesh so that only bone held the limb to the body, of the screaming sound of a shell, which caused everyone to drop to the floor of the theatre – but only after, Jess noticed, petite but gutsy Anne had paused to check the position of the plasma needle in the boy's arm – and then, once the explosion was heard and the shell thus detonated, to stand up, retake their positions and continue operating as if they wouldn't all die at any moment. And so it went on, the whooshing sound, the dive to the floor, the explosion, the standing up, the return to the operation, the endless changing of blood and plasma bags.

Man after injured man came in, faces lacerated, bones smashed. So many men needing so much blood that, after midnight, supplies ran dangerously low. The staff gave their arms over to needles to draw out their blood and so did Jess. She saw a surgeon, Major Henderson he'd said his name was, trying to stop an injured soldier – whose lungs were full of blood – from drowning, by drawing the blood out of his lungs with a tracheotomy tube and feeding that same blood back to the soldier intravenously. Wounded men arrived

unabated and Jess couldn't believe that ambulances were still driving through the sleeting rain and pitch dark outside.

'Hold his foot,' Major Henderson ordered Jess at one point.

Jess put down her camera and found herself staring at a leg being sawn off. She followed instructions, forcing herself to look at the face of the injured soldier without crying; he was the one losing his legs, not her.

The soldier grabbed Jess's hand. 'My feet are cold,' he murmured. 'Blanket.'

And even though the soldier had no feet, Jess found a blanket and tucked it around the empty space. It was that one small act of comfort that finally tipped her over into tears. She tried to dam them but Anne saw her face and touched her shoulder gently.

'Keep busy,' Anne said. 'When it's quiet, we have too much time to think, which only leads to crying. Try not to think, as much as you can.'

Jess tried, she really did. But when she saw the pile of amputated legs stacked against the side of the tent, she had to stop, breathing hard to keep the nothing in her stomach from pouring out. She wanted to go home.

Thankfully, the shelling lessened around the same time and Jess and three other nurses were sent off to bed where Jess struggled not to let the sudden and aching homesickness show on her face.

'Best put your bedroll under the cot,' Anne advised. 'If this keeps up we might need the protection.'

So Jess did as she was told, watching while Anne heated water in an empty ration can on a little oil stove in the middle of the tent before tipping the water into her helmet to begin a rudimentary wash. One of the other nurses scrubbed her thin and shivering back. Anne kept her boots on throughout because even the dams the women had built around the tent couldn't stop the rainwater from oozing across the floor. She finished by removing one foot at a time

from her boots and sprinkling each one liberally with the contents of a yellow tin of Marathon foot powder.

'You can have the next bath,' Anne said, nodding at the fresh batch of water that was heating.

'We're going to have to dig the trench around the powder room a bit deeper tomorrow,' another nurse said as she entered the tent. 'I think the entire Volturno River has been redirected at us.'

All that night, Jess sobbed in her bed and nobody could hear her through the noise. If Emile had been there, she would have taken him into her bed because the familiarity of his physical presence, his connection to a world she could comprehend, would at least be a kind of comfort. Instead, she saw all the photos she'd taken, the combat pictures the less powerful of them all: the nurse who'd called their forlorn latrine, its walls made from piles of folded blankets, a powder room; Anne's insistence that her rudimentary wash out of her helmet was a bath; Flick's bright pink painted fingernails; the full-length mirror one of the nurses had picked up from a wrecked palace on their way north into Italy and which hung from a rope attached to the tent roof. And the photo she hadn't taken, of the boy who'd died despite the tracheotomy – the boy who'd asked for watermelon just before his heart stopped; his ghost was there in every image.

The world needed to know that Monte Cassino, a speck on a map, the name of a battle to anyone in America, was a boy with no feet searching for comfort in a blanket. But what if Jess couldn't convey that? Her job was so much more than she'd understood it to be. And that was another reason she cried: because she doubted she had the talent, the stamina and the stomach to do her job the way it ought to be done.

Perhaps she should admit that she'd made a mistake. Perhaps she should ask Bel to send somebody over to take her place.

'Sure.' He nodded. 'It's in the office along the hall.' Before he turned away, he added, 'I told Célie we'd have dinner down in the folly.' He pointed to a structure halfway between the house and the canal, almost lost beneath a clump of startlingly red-leafed beech trees. 'At about eight. If that suits you.'

'Well, a girl's gotta eat. Enjoy your run.'

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The French Photographer

Natasha Lester

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