

CODENAME GABY

by

Nik Morton

(2,497 words)

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Missed it! Elaine saw the train moving out just as she reached the station. She was only a few seconds too late, but they were going to be the most important seconds of her life. A life she must now end.

Her mouth was dry, so dry, as her fingers fumbled in the lining of her jacket. A sickening sinking feeling swamped her as she realised the cyanide pill wasn't there. The fabric had been neatly cut, the pill removed. She felt the blood drain from her face as she grasped that she'd been betrayed. Tears of frustration and exhaustion blinded her. She pulled the Luger from her pocket and raised its snout to her pulsing throat.

Abruptly, her hand was jerked away and the weapon fired harmlessly. A leather-gloved hand clasped her jacket's padded shoulder. "Fraulein, come with us now. My friends in Paris await you."

His face was a blur, as was the forbidding black uniform with the armband's hated symbol. Black predominated.

Cursing herself for being so weak and slow, she attempted to maintain her balance as the surging sounds in her head became louder, like wind-rush under a parachute. She tried to turn away, but the man's steely grip tightened. Pain lanced up her arm and the gun clattered to stone at her feet. She cried out something about *Let me go with him, please!* A distant part of her curled inwardly in disgust, not believing she would beg anything of these people.

He was speaking, but the blood-rushing sounds in her mind blacked out meaning. Her knees buckled. The dam of consciousness was breached and absolving darkness flooded in.

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Even after all the hours of F Section training and the constant worrying preparation for this moment, the elation Elaine felt when the parachute's canopy opened was overwhelming. Eyes accustomed to night since their Lysander crossed the coast of Occupied France, she now scanned the cloud-filled sky, the occluded gibbous moon bathing the land in a calming purple hue.

Yes, Claude was over there, to the right, his 'chute billowing. Then she had needed all her concentration to prepare for the landing.

Exhilaration changed to annoyance with herself as she limped to the edge of the field, through the tall ears of wheat, careful not to break a noticeable trail. She had buried the silk and lines in the middle of the field, using the shovel from her backpack, whose weight threatened to topple her. God knows how Claude was going to manage with the radio suitcase.

The evening was so still: a mist seemed to be rising, enveloping their activities, covering the fields. Night and fog treatment: she shuddered, brushing her auburn fringe back. – *Nacht und Nebel, Rückkehr Unerwünscht*. Their damnable euphemisms! *Night and fog, return not required*. She wiped tears from her cheeks. Labelled thus, the last of the Prosper network had been taken away to Buchenwald.

In her mid-twenties, Elaine was familiar with Marseilles and had some trusted childhood friends there, particularly Jean Bousquet who maintained contact between Skepper's headquarters

in Rue Morentie and Steele's radio post at Mme Goutte's villa. Though in her sixties, Clotilde Goutte carried coded signals on many dangerous journeys.

Now, in the run-up to D-Day, Elaine, codename Gaby, was tasked with organising many receptions of arms and ammunition in the Vaucluse and Gard.

A surge of relief filled her as friendly hands clasped hers at the field's edge. She bravely dismissed the slight sprain in her ankle, and hobbled to the waiting cart. They quietly left as it started to rain, soaking them all.

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Her head was immersed in foul-smelling water for long periods till she almost choked. She'd already expunged any remnants of food from her stomach. Now, she gagged and gasped for air.

The rubber hoses that beat her neck and bare shoulders made wet slapping sounds, but she was too intent on grabbing her breath to heed the pain.

"Answer my questions and all this will stop, I promise you!" the seductive voice intoned.

She stilled her tongue. She wasn't sure if this was the Gestapo HQ in Rue des Saussaies or the SD HQ in Avenue Foch. It didn't matter. Both harboured interrogation rooms with men who enjoyed their inhuman work.

She mustn't divulge Paul's hideout. For all she knew, he might be dead. Elaine considered herself dead already, so nothing they could do to the husk that was her body would change that.

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"You've changed so much!" It was a moving reunion, Clotilde seeing no longer a child but an attractive young woman. Clotilde embraced her and tears ran freely; at least tears were free, and, sadly, there were plenty of them these days. But soon, Elaine told herself, soon all Europe would be free. She – and Clotilde, and all the others who listened to the illegal broadcasts – believed that. The veiled messages sang of hope.

Businesslike, over the next six weeks, Elaine built up the new Abbey network. Acting as courier, she passed her information to Claude who ran probably the greatest risk of all, transmitting from a nearby barn. To be caught in possession of a transmitter meant certain death. A risk he knew and laughed at.

Paul Steele and Elaine were encoding a particularly long message in the attic when Clotilde called up from the hallway. "There's been a raid at Rue Morentie!"

Oh, God – Skepper's HQ! Elaine's heart hammered faster and louder. She eyed Paul. "Safety first," she said. He nodded. Stomach churning with a terrible foreboding, Elaine carefully clambered on the chair, on to Steele's broad shoulders and concealed the transcription coded silk in a dark crevice of crossing joists.

He helped her down and seemed reluctant to release his hold. His dark brown eyes could not hide the sombre hammering of fear, like a palpable thing between them. "Gaby, if Skepper's been taken, we must get out on the next train. Every minute counts. They'll be watching the roads and stations..."

She gently placed fingertips on his lips. "No, Paul," she said, despite the tremors of rising anxiety in her body. "We mustn't cut-and-run while our network has a chance." Yet common sense told her to get out now. She wanted Paul to go on holding her. Then she thought of Skepper, Julien and the two resistance leaders at Rue Morentie.

Elaine broke the embrace and they climbed down from the attic.

Streetlights slanted through the lace curtains into the dark hallway and made the place seem claustrophobic.

Clotilde cupped trembling bony fingers over the black telephone mouthpiece: "Marie – she's in the quincaillerie across the road. She was going to visit, hoping to get word of her

English pilot... They'd just returned from the Vaucluse with the parachuted guns. She saw the Gestapo burst in..."

"At least they haven't got the weapons," Paul said.

Elaine shrugged into her raincoat. "Clotilde, where will they take them?" She checked her Luger's magazine and looked up.

Paul blanched and there was horror in Clotilde's eyes.

"What in God's name do you think you're doing?" he said.

"To – the – the prison," Clotilde broke in, and lowered the handset. "Les Baumettes..."

Thrusting the Luger into her coat's deep pocket, Elaine smiled. She placed her red beret aslant on her auburn hair. "Then we must intercept them, don't you think?"

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Paul had broken all the streetlights along this stretch. The only illumination came from the vehicles' headlights: an armoured carrier followed by a sinister black sedan.

At least the cache from the last airdrop was still intact, Elaine thought. Clotilde was now marshalling helpers to transfer those weapons elsewhere.

Heart thumping, Elaine stepped from the shadowy shop doorway as the carrier began to pass. She lobbed a grenade and smoke canister into the midst of the troopers.

The explosion was deafening.

Paul emerged from the other side of the street and ran up to the Mercedes, firing his revolver into the windscreen, killing the driver.

Elaine withdrew her Luger and ran to the other side.

The whole street seemed to light up like a Roman candle.

She froze as Bousquet scrambled out of the car with Skepper held in front of him as a shield: the traitor turned, seeing the advancing Paul. Elaine fired once, accurately, surprised at her steady aim, her cold detachment. Bousquet toppled to the ground.

"Split up," Paul said. He took Skepper and Julien, while she shepherded two very scared young resistance leaders, Alfonse and Marianne. Darting down side streets, along back alleys, over disused land and rubble.

The next fifteen minutes were exhilarating, frightening and exhausting. Her lungs threatened to burst. The two resistance leaders hardly uttered a word, apart from repeating *Merci, ma chérie, merci...*

Despite the inevitability of awful repercussions for tonight's action, Elaine found a friendly house. She telephoned Clotilde. The arms movement was confirmed, and Elaine breathed a sigh of relief. "Jean Bousquet is an infiltrator," she said. "I'll get Claude. You warn the others and move out." She hung up.

She gathered her two escapees and they ran on. Next stop, the train.

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Elaine clamped her lips together. A young man gripped a pair of pliers and pulled out her toenails, one by one. Her head swam. The pain was excruciating.

The Gestapo officer said, "Your Colonel Buckmaster at 64 Baker Street probably told you to hold out for 48 hours, to give your friends time to get away."

She was sure her heart missed a beat.

"You might like to know, you've been in this interrogation room just one hour."

An hour? It seemed like days...

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“It will be here in two minutes,” Elaine told them. The pair shivered with delayed fright in the dank gloom of the tunnel. “Board as it slows to negotiate the bend in the tunnel.” She briefly flicked on her torch. “There.”

“Right,” Alfonse grunted.

Marianne whispered, “What about you?”

“I have to get our codes, inform our friends.” Baker Street must be told about the infiltrator, one of how many more? And told of the demise of the Abbey network.

Elaine was almost deafened as the freight train rumbled past, air blasting her clothes, the tunnel wall vibrating against her back. She flashed on her torch: Alfonse and Marianne leapt for the handholds. She thought she heard a hastily shouted “Adieu!”

As the sound of the carriages thinned into the distance, the rails growing silent again, she turned and trudged back along the cindered track, towards Clotilde’s house.

No lights showed. Stealthily, she crept over the back garden wall, across the vegetable patch. The back door wasn’t locked.

Luger ready, she edged the door open and heard the familiar night sounds of the house settling. Nothing unusual. Thank God, Clotilde had made a run for it. The traitor Bousquet knew of her involvement, so the warning might have been in time.

Each stair tread creaked ominously loud as she walked up, keeping to the edges where there was less give.

Finally, she reached the landing and lowered the attic ladder. She climbed up.

It took quite a balancing act on three chairs to retrieve the silk codes, and then the pyramid toppled.

She landed on her hip, bruised but intact, and wryly recalled a bare two months ago when she’d twisted her ankle beneath the parachute. She could shrug off these little pains; they were nothing compared to the monthly curse, anyway.

Limping a little, Elaine left the villa.

Her stamina was flagging, yet there was still so much to do. A chest-constricting dash across a field, and then the barn loomed up, silent, huge, a dubious but welcome haven.

Tiredly, she pushed through the huge creaking door. “Claude!” she called in a harsh whisper.

Hay rustled above. “Up here, Gaby!” Of course, he was still waiting for the report Paul and she were compiling an age ago.

She clambered up the ladder, rungs digging into the instep of her shoes. “This is our last message, Claude – make it quick!”

His face reflected resignation more than surprise, as if it had only been a matter of time...

Time passed, time during which they sent the message, warned about Bousquet, destroyed the transmitter and burned the coded silk.

They hurried from the barn, in the railway station’s direction.

Aching and breathless, she needed to rest. Yet the fear that coursed through her veins kept her going. He faltered in the marshalling yard, waiting for her to catch up. “Run on!” she called. Claude ran ahead.

As she reached the station, the train pulled out.

Missed it!

Claude ran, grabbed a handrail and leapt, hung on. He looked back, his face pale.

She glanced over her shoulder.

Her heart sank. Menacing dark uniforms converged.

As she heaved in great gulps of air, her chest burning, the dark snake of the train blurred. This, she knew, was the end for her. But at least Claude, Alfonse and Marianne might get away, carry on the fight against the Nazi darkness. She reached for the suicide pill...

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Elaine didn't talk. She was escorted back to Fresnes prison, hobbling on her heels, and lay in solitary confinement, hugging her bloody toes. After a while, she was able to walk again.

The torture sessions diminished in frequency. She assumed they had fresh captives to question.

She had no idea how long she was kept in Fresnes but eventually she was taken with a group of other women prisoners to a crowded railway carriage destined for Ravensbrück.

They left Paris in the morning. The journey was long and tedious, filled with the stink of women denied basic sanitation. Some cried, others whimpered, but most maintained an eerie stoic silence. The train stopped at Alsace-Lorraine – the clock said 4pm. Here, they changed trains, but were too well guarded to risk escape.

Later, another stop occurred, but this time Red Cross representatives boarded with special passes and parcels.

“For you,” said a nurse, thrusting a package at Elaine. “Open it,” she added.

Inside was a folded Red Cross nurse's uniform. She glanced fearfully around her at the other women prisoners. A few watched, envy in their eyes; others didn't seem to care; most didn't notice.

Hastily, yet taking care not to blemish or bloody the fresh clothes and shoes, she donned the uniform. She buttoned up the blouse while the nurse's hands rake through her hair, straightening and tidying it. Sensing this concern and tenderness for another human being, Elaine almost broke down.

Steeling herself, however, she clambered down from the carriage and showed her pass to a soldier. He gestured her away.

She strode towards the waiting vehicles. She felt eyes on her and waited for some voice to betray her and bullets to pound into her back.

Legs shaking, Elaine climbed up into the Red Cross truck and sat on a hard wooden bench.

“Gaby,” whispered the nurse, “Paul and the others are safe.”

The truck drove off. Tears streamed freely down her cheeks.

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