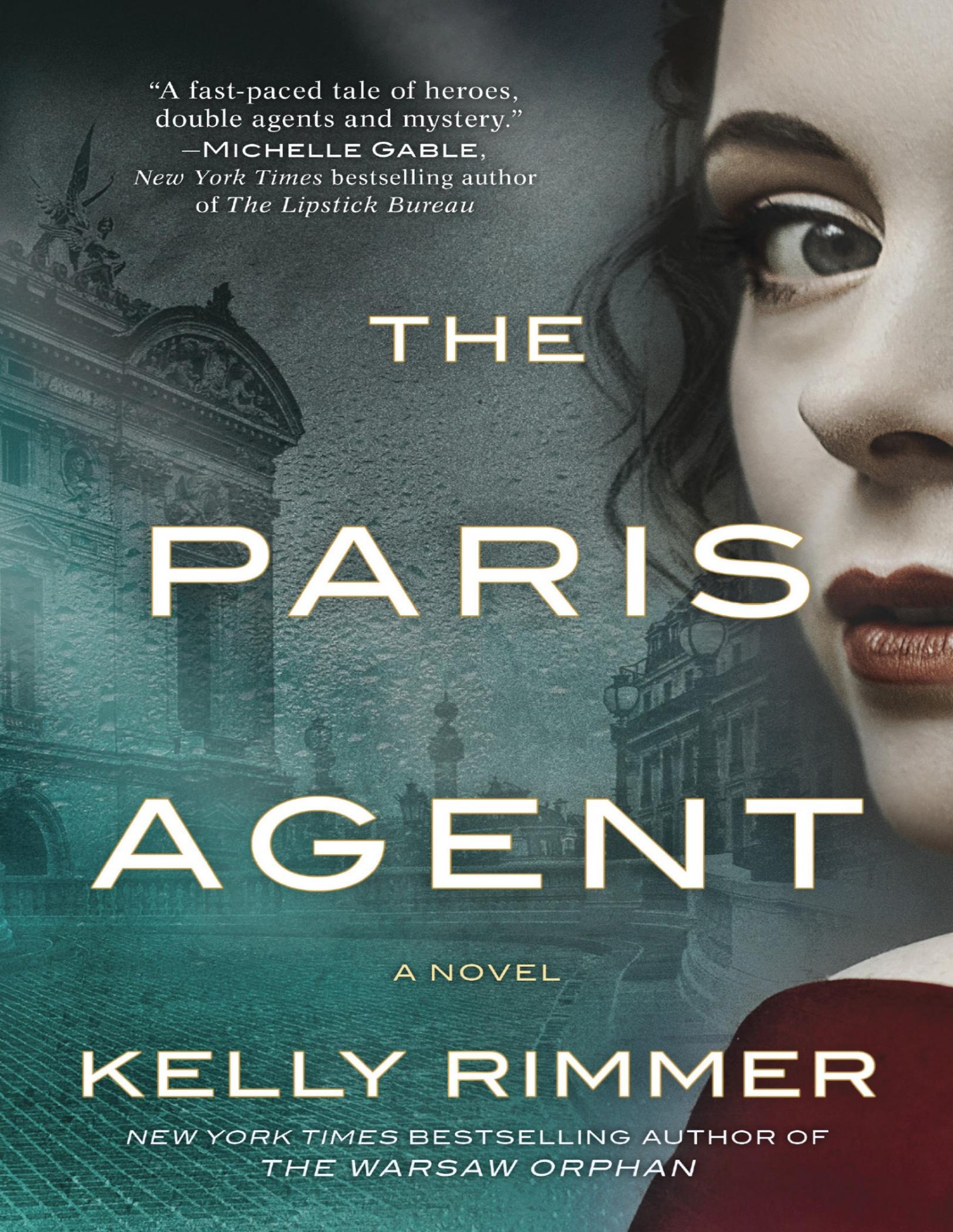


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A NOVEL

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Kelly Rimmer

The Paris Agent



If the multiverse is real, there's probably a world where I dedicated this book to the memory of my mother. As I was working on revisions to this story, she had a series of sudden health emergencies—a major heart attack, a series of strokes, COVID. We came close to losing her time and time again.

But she's still here.

Our family and her friends get more glorious days to enjoy her company, her wise advice and support, her pathological inability to *not* spoil her grandkids, the way she shows her love through good food and generosity, and a kindness that comes from her very soul.

Every extra hour we get to spend with her is because of the skilled intervention of those who choose to spend their lives working in health care. Cleaning staff kept the hospital sanitized; administration staff kept the paperwork moving; paramedics, specialists, doctors and nurses and allied health care workers went to work in a system under strain and did their best for their patients.

I publish this story in honor of the staff of the NSW Ambulance and Orange Health Service who saved my mother's life, but also for health care workers everywhere. At its heart, this is a book about sacrifice and courage, and in that sense, and after these last few difficult years, there is no more fitting dedication.

Thank you, thank you, thank you.

Kelly Rimmer is a *New York Times*, *Wall Street Journal*, *USA TODAY* and worldwide bestselling author of contemporary and historical fiction, including *The Warsaw Orphan* and *The Things We Cannot Say*. Kelly lives in rural Australia with her family and a whole menagerie of badly behaved animals. Her novels have been translated into more than twenty languages.

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PROLOGUE

ELOISE

Germany
October, 1944

Perhaps at first glance, we might have looked like ordinary passengers: four women in civilian clothes, sitting in pairs facing one another, the private carriage of the passenger train illuminated by the golden light of a cloudless late-summer sunrise. Only upon closer inspection would a passerby have seen the handcuffs that secured us, our wrists resting at our sides, between us not because we meant to hide them but because we were exhausted, and they were too heavy to rest on our bony thighs. Only at a second glance would they have noticed the emaciated frames or the clothes that didn't quite fit, or the scars and healing wounds each of us bore after months of torture and imprisonment.

I was handcuffed to a petite woman I knew first as Chloe, although in recent weeks, we had finally shared our real names with one another. It was entirely possible that she was the best friend I'd ever known—not that there was much competition for that title, given friendship had never come easy to me. Two British women, Mary and Wendy, sat opposite us. They had trained together, as Chloe and I had trained together, and like us, they had been “lucky enough” to recently find themselves imprisoned together too. Mary and Wendy appeared just as shell-shocked as Chloe and I were by the events of that morning.

As our captors had reminded us often since our arrests, we were plainclothes assassins and as such, not even entitled to the basic protections of the Geneva Convention. So why on earth had we been allowed the luxury of a shower that morning, and why had we been given clean civilian clothes to wear after months in the filthy outfits we'd been wearing since our capture? Why were they transporting us by passenger train, and in a luxurious private carriage, no less? This wasn't my first time transferring between prisons since my capture. I knew from bitter personal experience

that the usual travel arrangement was, at best, the crowded, stuffy back end of a covered truck or at worst, a putrid, overcrowded boxcar.

But this carriage was modern and spacious, comfortable and relaxed. The leather seats were soft beneath me and the air was clean and light in a way I'd forgotten air should be after months confined to filthy cells.

"This could be a good sign," I whispered suddenly. Chloe eyed me warily, but my optimism was picking up steam now, and I turned to face her as I thought aloud. "I bet Baker Street has negotiated better conditions for us! Maybe this transfer is a step toward our release. Maybe that's why..." I nodded toward our only companions in the carriage, seated on the other side of the aisle. "Maybe that's why *she's* here. Could it be that she's been told to keep us safe and comfortable?"

Chloe and I had had little to do with the secretary at Karlsruhe Prison, but I had seen her in the hallway outside of our cell many times, always scurrying after the terrifyingly hostile warden. It made little sense for a secretary to accompany us on a transfer, but there she was, dressed in her typical tweed suit, her blond hair constrained in a thick bun at the back of her skull. The secretary sat facing against the direction of travel, opposite the two armed guards who earlier had marched me and Chloe onto the covered truck at the prison, then from the covered truck onto the platform to join the train. The men had not introduced themselves, but like all agents with the British Special Operations Executive, I'd spent weeks memorizing German uniforms and insignias. I knew at a glance that these were low-ranking *Sicherheitsdienst* officers—members of the SD. The Nazi intelligence agency.

The secretary spoke to the guards, her voice low but her tone playful. She held a suitcase on her lap, and she winked as she tapped it. The men both brightened, surprised smiles transforming their stern expressions, then she theatrically popped the suitcase lid to reveal a shockingly generous bounty of thick slices of sausages and chunks of cheese, a large loaf of sliced rye bread and...was that butter? The scent of the food flooded the carriage as the secretary and the guards used the suitcase as a table for their breakfast.

It was far too much food for three people but I knew they'd never share it with us. My stomach rumbled violently, but after months surviving on scant prison rations, I was desperate enough that I felt lucky to be in the mere presence of such a feast.

“I heard the announcement as we came onto the carriage—this train goes to Strasbourg, doesn’t it? Do you have any idea what’s waiting for us there? This is all a bit...” Wendy paused, gnawing her lip anxiously. “None of it makes sense. Why are they treating us so well?”

“This is the Strasbourg train,” Chloe confirmed cautiously. There was a subtle undertone to those words—something hesitant, concerned. I frowned, watching her closely, but just then the secretary leaned toward the aisle. She spoke to us in rapid German and pointed to the suitcase in her lap.

Had we done something wrong? More German words—but it may as well have been Latin to me, because I spoke only French and English. Just then, the secretary huffed impatiently and pushed the suitcase onto the empty seat beside her as she stood. She held a plate toward me, and when I stared at it blankly, she waved impatiently toward Chloe and spoke again in German.

“What...”

“She wants you to take it,” Chloe translated for me, and I took the plate with my one free hand, bewildered. Chloe passed it to Wendy, and so on, until we all held plates in our hands. The secretary then passed us fat slices of sausage and cheese and several slices of bread each. Soon, our plates were filled with the food, each of us holding a meal likely more plentiful than we’d experienced since our arrival in France.

“She’s toying with us,” Mary whispered urgently. “She’ll take it back. She won’t let us eat it so don’t get your hopes up.”

I nodded subtly—I’d assumed the same. And so, I tried to ignore the treasure sitting right beneath my nose. I tried not to notice how garlicky and rich that sausage smelled, how creamy the cheese looked, or how the butter was so thick on the bread that it might also have been cheese. I told myself the increasing pangs in my stomach were just part of the torture and the smartest thing I could do was to ignore them altogether, but the longer I held the plate, the harder it was to refocus my mind on anything but the pain in my stomach and the feast in my hands that would bring instant and lasting relief.

When all the remaining food had been divided between us prisoners, the secretary waved impatiently toward the plates on our laps, then motioned toward her mouth.

“Eat!” she said, in impatient but heavily accented English.

Chloe and I exchanged shocked glances. Conditions in Karlsruhe Prison were not the worst we'd seen since our respective captures, but even so, we'd been hungry for so long. The starvation was worse for Chloe than me. She had a particularly sensitive constitution and ate a narrow range of foods in order to avoid gastric distress. Since our reunion at the prison, we'd developed a system of sharing our rations so she could avoid the foods which made her ill but even so, she remained so thin I had sometimes worried I'd wake up one morning to find she'd died in her sleep.

"What can you eat?" I asked her urgently.

She looked at our plates then blurted, "Sausage. I'll eat the sausage."

For the next ten minutes we prisoners fell into silence except for the occasional, muffled moan of pleasure and relief as we devoured the food. I was trying to find the perfect compromise between shoving it all into my mouth as fast as I could in case the secretary changed her mind and savoring every bite with the respect a meal like that commanded. By the time my plate was empty and my surroundings came back to me, the guards and the secretary were having a lovely time, laughing amongst themselves and chatting as if they didn't have a care in the world.

For a long while, we prisoners traveled in silence, holding our plates on our laps at first, then after Wendy set the precedent, lifting them to our mouths to lick them clean. Still, the guards chatted and laughed and if I judged their tones correctly, even flirted with the secretary? It gradually dawned on me that they were paying us very little attention.

"How far is Strasbourg? Does anyone know?" I asked. Wendy and Mary shook their heads as they shrugged, but Chloe informed me it was hundreds of miles. Her shoulders had slumped again despite the gift of the food, and I nudged her gently and offered a soft smile. "We have a long journey ahead. Good. That means we have time for a pleasant chat while our bellies are full."

By unspoken agreement, we didn't discuss our work with the Special Operations Executive (SOE). It was obvious to me that each of the other women had been badly beaten at some point—Wendy was missing a front tooth, Mary held her left hand at an odd angle as if a fractured wrist had healed badly, and Chloe... God, even if she hadn't explained to me already, I'd have known just looking at her that Chloe had been to hell and back. It seemed safe to assume we had all been interrogated literally almost to death at some point, but there was still too much at stake to risk giving away

anything the Germans had not gleaned from us already. So instead of talking about our work or our peculiar circumstances on that train, we talked as though we weren't wearing handcuffs. As though we weren't on our way to, at the very best, some slightly less horrific form of imprisonment.

We acted as though we were two sets of friends on a casual jaunt through the countryside. We talked about interesting features outside our window—the lush green trees in the tall forests, the cultivated patches of farmland, the charming facades of cottages and apartments on the streets outside. Mary cooed over a group of adorable children walking to school, and Wendy talked about little shops we passed in the picturesque villages. Chloe shared longing descriptions of the foods she missed the most—fresh fruit and crisp vegetables, eggs cooked all manner of ways, herbs and spices and salt. I lamented my various aches and pains and soon everyone joined in and we talked as if we were elderly people reflecting on the cruelty of aging, not four twenty-somethings who had been viciously, repeatedly beaten by hateful men.

I felt the warmth of the sunshine on my face through the window of the carriage and closed my eyes, reveling in the simple pleasures of fresh air and warm skin and the company of the best friend I'd ever known. I even let myself think about the secretary and that picnic, and feel the relief that I was, for the first time in months, in the company of a stranger who had shown kindness toward me. I'd almost forgotten that was something people did for one another.

I'd never been an especially cheerful sort of woman and I'd never been an optimist, but those past months had forced me to stare long and hard at the worst aspects of the human condition and I'd come to accept a certain hopelessness even when it came to my own future. But on that train, bathed in early morning sunlight and basking in a full stomach and pleasant company, my spirits lifted until they soared toward something like hope.

For the first time in months, I even let myself dream that I'd survive to embrace my son Hughie again. Maybe, even after all I'd seen and done, the world could still be good. Maybe, even after everything, I could find reason to have faith.