

London: Chapter 2

No one ever described London as hot and humid until a few decades ago. Things had changed during the years of Queen Victoria's reign. The air was thick and sticky as Margaret Goulden walked along the brick road past the river docks along the Thames.

Smoke from the factories lining the northern shoreline scratched at Margaret's throat as she quickened her pace. The river to her left twinkled with a black, oily sheen. Six months ago, a lit wad of tobacco ignited the surface for three days. With the industrial waste burnt off, city officials declared the water clean and dismissed the mounting public concerns.

Margaret's family still lived in the Buchanan family homestead in Edinburgh. After years at Oxford University suppressing her grating Scottish tongue, Margaret spent the last few months looking for trouble. Striding along the waterfront, she watched and waited for the dock hands to call out to her.

"Oye, bonnie luv. You and me later ta-nite. We'll go to out and get pissed."

"What about your sweet little trouble and strife waiting up for you at home?"

Margaret called back. "Won't she be angry when you stumble in, skint left from a week's pay?"

"She's not my bloody guv. Now what do you say, want to see what I have hidden in me strides?"

Margaret let him have it: "I've seen plenty of little hampton wicks before. You can take it to rub a dub dub without me and wank it yourself."

The dock hand's neck turned crimson and he ducked his head, pretending to focus on his work while his coworkers laughed.

The dock hand hit buttons and pulled levers mounted on a flat iron bar attached to his belt. The small control panel operated a set of four mechanical arms strapped to his back. The contraption hiccupped back to life, vibrating and belching black soot. The steel arms jerked in awkward, unnatural motions as they loaded cargo crates onto a barge.

Margaret kept walking beside the Thames, threading through the complicated London docks. She passed Battersea Park, noting the black smoke belching from a cigar-shaped vessel, slung low beneath the waterline. Margaret slowed her pace and squinted at the forty-meter-long iron hull plowing upriver.

Two mechanics were on deck, wearing thick leather jumpsuits and intricate pairs of goggles with layers of flip-down lenses. Sewn into the jumpsuits were dozens of canvas pockets stuffed with pliers and scissors, switches and coils and springs, hammers and screw drivers. They worked as a team, rewelding damaged sheets of metal along the hull.

Margaret tripped over a child standing still at her feet while staring out at the ship. Along the docks and in the south of London, a child never stood still unless they were hiding. Young and old worked all day and all night in the brick and mortar factories stacked on top of each other.

Most factory workers in this part of town were foreign born. A dozen languages filled the stale, smoky air, blending into a single indecipherable montage. European languages like French, Spanish, German, Gaelic, and Russian clashed with tongues from the far corners of the globe: Mandarin, Vietnamese, Korean, African dialects, Arabic, and Persian.

Margaret danced around the people blocking her path. As the military vessel steamed past, the air along the shoreline became charged with electrical fury, venomous hatred leashed and tethered. Most people around her had seen a ship like the one on the Thames as part of an armada that stormed the beaches of their homeland years ago. As governments fell, the displaced and hungry immigrated to the British Isles in droves.

Passing through the crowd, Margaret shook her head to dislodge the anger. She smiled to herself and picked up the pace. The Vauxhall Bridge spanned the river up ahead; she had a date with her husband's younger cousin Constance.

Constance Ventor stood on the north side of Vauxhall Bridge facing the street. She spun a small round toy away from her, tossing it down until it reached the end of its string before tugging on the string tied around her finger. The toy shot back up before it hit the ground. Constance gripped it tight and tossed it back down towards the ground. This time, as it reached the end of the string the gadget spun like a weather vane in a storm and threw off yellow and green sparks. A moment later the toy settled back into her hand.

Twenty-year-old Constance smiled at a little boy staring at her. She brushed her plain, mousy-brown hair away from her eyes and tossed the toy back down.

A new barrage of red and blue and green sparks threw themselves from the toy as the boy's caretaker appeared behind him. He tugged on the simple, clean sleeves of her dress, prompting her to lean down and listen as he whispered in her ear.

She straightened up and approached Constance: "My charge is very much taken by your toy."

"Thank you," said Constance, bowing her head while smirking at the child.

She lifted the lid of the wooden box at her feet. A dozen toys twinkled in the hazy afternoon sun, winking and promising a good time to whomever picked one up. The nanny looked back at the boy, then turned again to address the young woman in the faded white dress, leather corset and worn leather boots.

"Can I assume you're selling these toys?"

"Yes, ma'am," replied Constance.

"How much?"

"Three shillings. Chose whichever you like."

The woman nodded, motioning to the boy to pick out his new treasure. She opened her handbag and dug around the bottom for three coins. The boy knelt on the paved bricks and picked up the gadgets one at a time. He weighed each one, turning them over and over in his pudgy hands.

"If you want to try, slip your ring finger through the loop like this," said Constance, slipped the string of her own toy on the boy's finger. "Toss it down to the

ground.” He let go and a pinwheel of sparks leapt off the toy before it climbed back up the string.

The boy smiled but remained silent. He returned Constance’s toy, then tried out each of the five finalists. Twice.

His nanny smiled: “These are clever toys. Where did you get them?”

“Made them myself.”

“Where did you learn such a skill?”

“My father was a tinkerer. I spent half my childhood in his workshop while he built toys and gadgets like these.”

The woman tugged her thick frock coat closed. “Hope he wasn’t one of those scoundrels responsible for so much discord and terrorism in the Empire.”

“No, ma’am. He was a loyal Queen’s man. Taught me the same.”

The woman offered Constance a weak smile. The boy returned to the wooden box, double-checking the toy he picked against the others, lest he regret his decision later.

“Do you do anything else with your skills other than make toys and trinkets?”

Constance returned the woman’s weak smile. “I’m a student at Oxford University. Tuition is expensive, so make toys and trinkets for sale.”

“Oh.” The woman’s voice rose three octaves. “I didn’t know Oxford admitted women.”

“Yes ma’am.”

The woman gave Constance no visible reaction. She turned her attention back to her ward, who was admiring his shiny new prize.

“Thank you,” said Constance as they turned to leave. “Have fun.” The boy looked back over his shoulder and smiled back at the lanky woman with the plain brown hair.

Constance flipped the lid of her box closed with the toe of her boot. She checked the time on her pocket watch, the square and compass of the Freemasons glinting from the backside. Margaret was late.

Margaret approached Vauxhall Bridge and spotted Constance on the other side standing beside her box of tricks. Constance's white cotton petticoat and a brown leather corset matched Margaret's. The young woman looked thin and awkward, spinning her toy on her finger.

Margaret watched Constance crouch down and tie her boot lace, the soft brown leather reaching to her knee. Tucked inside the student engineer's boots were a dozen secret additions, including a retractable toe blade and a compartment for a single-shot pistol the size of a finger.

Constance stood up and spotted Margaret walking to her. She stashed her spinning toys and waved a hand full of cracked nails with grease pressed beneath them. The stale smell engine oil and tanned leather lingered underneath Constance's perfume cover up.

Constance picked up her wooden box and the ladies walked north together, away from the Thames and towards Hyde Park. Constance chatted without paying attention to her friend.

"I've had trouble building an automaton arachnid for a professor. I turned in a functioning model and received low marks. Are you even listening to me, Margaret?"

Margaret turned her head back around to look at Constance. "Sorry, luv. But something doesn't feel right." She scanned the crowds on the street in front of them.

"You're acting paranoid again."

"The Resistance operates across the isles without fear these days," said Margaret. "I am concerned; there'll be a reckoning soon."

"I take it back. You're not paranoid, you're a bloody loon." Constance bit her lip and sighed. "I'm not sure why I agreed to attend this rally with you."

"Because you want to open up your mind to other possibilities besides Victoria's."

"I agreed to go with you because it was so important to you." replied Constance. "And to get you to stop hassling me about my faith in Queen and Country."

"If you already know, then why did you ask?"

“Because,” Constance said with another sigh, “I’m not sure why I caved. If I get arrested at an anti-government rally, I could lose my scholarship.”

“They would never take away your scholarship,” said Margaret. “You’re too bloody brilliant.”

“But what if I get arrested?”

“There hasn’t been a single arrest at a rally in months. It is a bad sign. I think they’re planning something big for the Resistance groups on the isles after the holidays.”

“Some would call it a good thing that no one’s been arrested in months,” said Constance.

“It’s only a matter of time. I cannot believe you’ve forgotten what happened in Liverpool last year.”

Constance furrowed her eyebrows. “If the Resistance would stick to distributing pamphlets, people wouldn’t die.”

The conversation slowed as the women hurried down the busy street towards Hyde Park. Navigating the roads in the heart of London required concentration to dodge the droves of pedestrians, peddlers with push-carts, and the occasional team of horses. Steam driven carriages and taxis were a unique hazard. They plowed through the narrow cobblestone roads at far greater speeds, trailing soot and smoke that obscured the vision of everyone in their wake.

“I see you’ve gone back to trousers,” said Constance.

“I always feel more comfortable in trousers; easier to move in. Ever try to chase somebody through crowded streets in a petticoat?”

“Is that a rhetorical question?”

“Of course not.”

Constance stared at Buckingham Palace as they walked by. Red and blue banners imprinted with Union Jacks hung from the highest eaves and the lowest iron fences in anticipation of Douglas Tank Day.

Hundreds of guards surrounded the palace in the neat and trim uniforms of the British army. Each one shouldered a steel rifle with a wooden stock; some stood at

attention, some at ease. All watched and waited. A visible force deterring any foolish notions of aggression against the crown.

“I learned at university they have an entire garrison, a thousand soldiers, stationed beneath the palace. Same underneath Parliament.”

“I remember hearing that,” muttered Margaret.

“The upper ramparts have steam-driven mechanisms that fire iron spears as tall as me. They can throw the spears a full kilometer.”

“I cringe thinking about that sort of firepower hanging over our heads,” said Margaret.

“This is our nation and that is our firepower.”

Margaret sighed but bit her tongue. A minute later she came to stop surveyed the scene at Hyde Park. They had arrived.

Margaret and Constance stood on the edge of the crowd in Hyde Park. The speaker had already worked the young men and women packed in front of the stage into a self-righteous rage. A larger group of curious onlookers and passersby hung around the edges of the congregation.

Margaret leaned over and to talk to Constance. “That’s Mattie. She’s one of the organizers of the London Resistance.”

Margaret and Constance stood to the side of the wooden platform on high stilts. Mattie stood in the middle of the stage holding a cone-shaped device that projected her voice across the crowd.

“Don’t let yourselves be fooled,” Mattie said, her voice intense and angry. “The British Empire does more than fight wars to ensure self-protection. The British Empire does more than colonize sparsely populated corners of the globe.” Mattie’s voice danced with the engaging, up-and-down pitch of a practiced orator.

“What have we done with the technology that Douglas Tank gave this nation? Was he sent from heaven to bless us all? Or was he a false prophet, sent by the devil?”

“Across the world and spanning decades Queen Victoria’s soldiers slaughter innocent people. They enslave villages and towns, cities and nations. British soldiers forced the relocation of countless natives. You can see the proof all around you; they work in the factories across the British Isles.”

A pair of young men hanging on the outside of the crowd had enough and pulled the tarp off their stockpile of rotten vegetables. They let loose a volley of tomatoes and cabbages at the stage, shouting taunts and laughing. Most of the rotten produce hit people in the back of the head pressed in front of the stage.

A minute later, another group of men in plain clothes hustled the troublemakers across the park, knocked them to the ground and pelted them with their own rotten vegetables.

“I appreciate your accompanying me here.” Margaret spoke to Constance without looking at her. “I know that Mattie’s beliefs are different than yours.”

Mattie’s voice boomed across the park, filling the air once again with a measurable electric charge. “Our isles have not been invaded by a foreign power in hundreds of years, yet we wage wars for security and peace. The only course of action for Great Britain, if we are a peace-loving nation, is to end all foreign wars.”

“I am a supporter of peace,” muttered Constance. “But her logic is questionable.”

“It’s the logic used by the British Empire that’s flawed,” replied Margaret. “Mattie’s message is simple: if we want peace, stop invading other nations.”

“That’s not what she said,” said Constance.

“Essentially.”

“And what about how Britain helps struggling people around the world? Without us they would have no medicines, no roads, no schools,” said Constance.

“That’s the flawed logic I was talking about.”

Mattie’s voice grew with intensity: “Conquering a free and independent state does not improve their lives. Subjugated people are not better off for exchanging modern

conveniences for the exploitation of their homeland.” Mattie paused for dramatic effect. She raised her voice for the final sentence, driving her point home. “Colonization is not our God-given right.”

“The rights of a backward and possibly barbaric people to govern themselves is a controversial idea,” said Constance. “But it’s one that has gained a considerable amount of traction in the past few years.”

“I’d bet the controversial theory becomes accepted fact in the coming years.” Margaret perked up her head and scanned the edges of the crowd. “I see someone I know,” she said. “I’ll be right back.”

Margaret slunk down behind the onlookers flanking the stage and disappeared towards the back of the crowd.

Mattie kept preaching, working herself into an angry fury on the wooden platform. Then she stopped speaking mid-sentence and stared over the heads of the crowd.

A half dozen iron plated, steam-powered tanks bore down on the crowd, appearing suddenly from the far side of the grassy park. They looked clumsy, large, heavy, and unbalanced, spilling smoke and soot and oil on the lawn.

Despite their awkward appearance, the tanks had a wicked reputation. The gun turrets perched on top fired cannon balls with enough force to collapse a building. The flanks were impenetrable, battle-beaten metal, emblazoned with the Union Jack.

The onlookers watching from the rear fringes of the crowd saw the tanks first and started screaming. They ran from the park and scattered in droves. Those in the center of the crowd were not as lucky. They fell over and trampled each other trying to get away.

In a minute, the tanks rolled through the heart of the crowd. People threw themselves left and right, trying to get out of the tank’s path. Several individuals were not fast enough and fell under their treads.

Mattie heard a distinct voice over the platform's edge; Margaret Goulden of the Glasgow Resistance was working. With harsh persuasion, Margaret bullied rally goers clear of the wooden stage. She swept them to the left and right in groups of two and three, clearing the edges of the crowd before working her way in.

The tanks maintained their line, all six plowing forward, side-by-side, cutting a path thirty-meters wide. The iron plated carriages did not deviate from their course to pursue groups of scattering people.

The rally goers still left began stuffing rags in bottles of alcohol and tossing them at the tanks. The armored vehicles still held their course as they headed for the wooden stage that suddenly appeared rickety and weak.

Bottles broke on the iron plates and lit small fires that did no damage. The bullets fired from an unseen gunman bounced off like birds flying into glass windows.

"Get down, Mattie," yelled Margaret. "I'm going to stop them."

"You're insane," shouted Mattie from up above. "You can't stop them. Just get everyone out of here."

Margaret did not hear the organizer of the London Resistance as she turned and ran towards the armored vehicles. She shouted at every individual standing their ground with a bottle of booze or service revolver.

"Flank them," she yelled. "Line up alongside and trap them in the middle. Light the grass and trees around the tanks."

Constance grabbed hold of Margaret's wrist and spun the young woman around. "People are dying," shouted Constance. "They're trampling each other. Come back and help me clear the park." Margaret pulled free of Constance's grip and disappeared into the smoke and haze created by the Resistance's pathetic weapons.

Mattie stood on the stage giving orders to the crowd through her voice amplifier. No one was listening.

"Get off the stage and run," shouted Constance, on the grass below Mattie's feet. "The tanks are lining up to fire."

Mattie looked down at the stranger standing below her. Her eyes swept up, left, then right, digesting the scene and the horrors all around her. A few followers stood their ground in front of the stage, shouting insults at the tanks and throwing rocks and sticks and empty bottles.

The tanks ground to a halt, belching smoke and soot. They seemed to laugh at the stones and bullets and bottles that bounced off their plating. They raised the guns mounted on the top of the armored cars and took aim at the stage.

“Run,” yelled Constance, shoving a pair of stone throwers clear of the stage before diving for cover herself.

The six tanks fired as one. Cannon balls tore through the wooden platform like a hurricane through a thatch roof. The tanks rolled back from the recoil of the guns. They shifted gears and plowed forward, crushing the splintered wooden stage debris and anyone trapped below. The tanks kept going out of Hyde Park, forming a single file line and driving down the middle of Vauxhall Road until they were out of sight.