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# THE ENIGMA GIRL

A silhouette of a woman walking on a bridge railing against a cloudy sky with birds flying.

HENRY  
PORTER

# **THE ENIGMA GIRL**

Also by Henry Porter

*Remembrance Day*

*A Spy's Life*

*Empire State*

*Brandenburg*

*The Dying Light*

*Firefly*

*White Hot Silence*

*The Old Enemy*

**THE  
ENIGMA  
GIRL**

**HENRY  
PORTER**



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*In memory of Dr Annie Elliot  
and for Dr Toby Dean  
and Dr Mike Elliot*





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*Acknowledgements*



# PART ONE



## CHAPTER 1

She lets the pickup freewheel to a stop in the driveway, unplugs her phone from the car's audio and gets out, noticing lumps of fen mud in the footwell. It's cold; ice particles glittered in the headlights on the way from the dig. She stands with the door open, deciding whether to check on her mother straight away or ferry the bags of shopping into the house. Her attention goes to the alignment of shrubs in the garden which, in silhouette, look very much like a man watching the house. It can't be anyone because she would have seen them when the headlights swept across the garden as she entered the driveway, but she peers into the thickening light anyway. A thrush starts up with a song that insists spring has arrived. There's no one out there. She shivers and glances at her phone, which has been pinging all the way with messages from the team at the Alder Fen dig, then looks up, catches herself lit by the phone in the wing mirror and rubs the mud from her chin and earlobe. She turns to the back of the Nissan smiling to herself. It's been a good day, spectacular, in fact. The tailgate comes down with a bang and the thrush drops from its perch and disappears into the dark with a few wing beats.

Six bags and the booze. She's tugged two on to the tailgate when she hears a car in the lane, turns and sees an Audi saloon coming into the driveway. It pulls up a few yards behind the pickup, blinding her with a full beam. She doesn't wait to see who's in the car, but reaches into the truck and seizes the mattock, a pickaxe with a curved adze blade,

that lies alongside an old jute tool bag, and whirls round, feet planted wide, implement at the ready. She puts a hand up to the glare.

A large man clambers out of the passenger side and hitches his trousers.

‘Steady, Slim,’ he says. ‘We’re friends.’ He calls to the driver who stands by his open door, ‘You want to watch this one, Mr Salt. She’ll take your bloody head off with that thing. Won’t think twice about it.’

‘What do you want?’

‘Slim! It’s me – Tudor Mills. Remember?’ She does. Mills, the ex-Met detective, MI5 fixer, fetcher, tracker, and old-school sexist braggart. He’d pursued her through half a dozen countries in Europe, five months before. But Mills didn’t find her; nobody did. She walked into the Madrid Embassy, showed her passport – the one issued to Alice Parsons, which, of course, she shouldn’t have had with her on the plane when she was undercover as Sally Latimer – and was eventually repatriated on an easyJet flight.

‘I need to see you properly. Turn off the lights and show yourselves.’

The driver leans into the car and dims them. ‘See! Just me and Mr Salt here,’ he says. ‘You haven’t met Peter before, because, like you, he’s been working out of the office for a considerable length of time. Peter Salt – this is Alice “Slim” Parsons.’

Salt raises a hand. ‘Alice or Slim? Which do you prefer?’

‘Friends call her Slim,’ says Mills. ‘And we’re friends, aren’t we?’

‘It’s up to you,’ she says.

‘We’re here to take you back.’

‘No one said anything.’

‘Try answering your phone, reading your text messages. The office hasn’t heard a peep out of you for weeks. No response – nothing. You’re meant to check in, right? So, that’s why me and Mr Salt came all the way back in time to the flatlands where Friday night is fuck-your-sister-night. Now we’ve found you, we’re going to escort you to *la capital* in one lovely piece. Everyone’s been concerned for you, honey. I mean *everyone*.’

‘I don’t use that phone. It’s been switched off for weeks. They said I wouldn’t be needed until the end of April at the earliest, so I did what I was told, and kept my head down.’ She stows the mattock, then rounds on Mills. ‘And don’t *honey* me, Tudor.’

She hoists two bags and holds them out. ‘You can help bring these in – there are two each.’ She’ll leave the booze until later.



Mills closes his door and approaches. 'What's this – gardening tools?'

'Something like that.'

'Gardening leave doesn't mean you've got to be gardening. You know that, right?'

'I'm not serving my notice, and I'm not on gardening leave.'

'Yet,' says Mills.

'Yet nothing.' She hands him bags and points towards the entrance of the house where she's been living with her mother, Diana, over the winter. But there's something wrong. No lights in the house, no glow spreading from the kitchen across the lawn. She takes two bags and brushes past Mills. 'Bring the rest, will you.'

She drops the bags, goes round switching on lights, calling out. No sound except the click and rumble of the heating system firing up on the timer. Where's the dog? She goes to the study where her mother would normally have come to rest in a stupor with the lights, television, and electric fire all on. The radio, too, on occasions. Her chair is empty; no glass on the table beside the chair, no newspaper folded to the crossword, either. But the rest is as it should be – a book, open and face down, and on the round table by the window with a bunch of wilting daffodils are the photographs of Slim as a small girl, her maternal grandparents, her dead father Toby, and brother Matthew, the one her mother sometimes holds or props beside her on the sofa. She checks the rooms that are never used on the left-hand side of the house and crosses the wide flagstone passage, which her mother grandly calls 'the hall', to pass through the kitchen and into a pantry where, over the winter, she has sometimes found her sitting with a cigarette in a grim stand-off with one of the litre bottles of gin that are killing her. Her jag, as she calls it. Slim sees a mouse in one of the traps and knows her mother wouldn't linger in the room with that. Where the hell is Loup, the nervous German shepherd–collie stray her mother homed during the first lockdown, and named so inappropriately? Maybe she's taken him for one of those turns round the village that end with a distress call announcing that neither Diana nor Loup can find their way home, or that one of them can't make it for reasons of stamina. But her coat, hat and gloves are piled on the settle and the bootees with sheepskin finish are beneath it, so she hasn't gone out.

Mills and Salt are hesitating just inside the front door with the bags. 'Come in for God's sake. My mother's missing. She may've collapsed somewhere. One of you check the garden, please. There's an outhouse at the back, garage, and greenhouse, too.'

*Collapsed* is enough. No need to be explicit. Salt sets down the shopping bags and goes outside.

Mills comes in with no great urgency and drops the bags on the settle. 'Goes missing often, does she, your mother?'

'No, which is why I'm worried.'

'Maybe she's taken the car for a spin.'

'She doesn't drive.' Slim isn't going to explain. Her mother has been banned since an incident in Ely, about which she remains vague. Drink driving was the charge, but there had to be more to explain twenty months off the road. Resisting arrest, giving the officers an earful; that would be her.

'So, it's just the two of you, with your brother being away,' says Mills. 'And out here without a car, that's isolating for the lady.'

He'd read Slim's file before setting off to track her across Europe. In her interviews with the Security Service, she'd had to tell them that twelve years before, Matthew took his charm, talent and addictions to the north of England and, after minimal contact for about a year, was never heard from again. Just bloody vanished.

Mills is moving about looking at the pictures, making a sucking noise with his teeth. She puts a hand up to him. 'Can you stand still? Thank you.' And she dials her mother's phone. They wait, listening to the Victorian-era Steward's House, which is old enough and large enough to produce its own sighs and murmurs. The wind rattles a window at the back, and panels and floorboards in the passage leading to what was once a servant's room occasionally creak.

Their eyes meet. Yes, they both hear a vibration on the floorboards somewhere above them. Slim dashes up the stairs and reaches a short landing six stairs below the top floor where the staircase doubles back on itself. She can't see a damned thing and scrambles up the last stairs to hit the light switch at the top. Her mother is lying with her body dreadfully torqued, her legs wrenched one way; shoulders and head the other. Blood from a head wound has settled in a liverish puddle on the floorboards and runner carpet. Slim kneels beside her and takes her hand. 'Oh, Jesus, Mum! What've you done now? What happened to you?' She bends to put her ear close to her mother's mouth. She waits, staring up at Mills who is crouching beside her. She thinks she hears, or rather feels a sigh. 'She's alive – just. Get an ambulance.' She dampens two fingers and places

them in front of her mother's open mouth – she's sure she can feel breath. Mills waits until she nods then heads downstairs noisily. She shouts after him, 'The house is hard to find. You'll need to help them.'

Salt bounds up the stairs and kneels beside her. 'Can I help?'

'Do you know what to do?' she asks. 'I have some idea, but . . .'

He places two fingers at her mother's carotid artery. Slim shifts so she's not in the way of the light. She sees Salt's expression. 'What?'

'I think her heart's stopped.' He looks her over again. 'And I believe she's hurt her back in the fall, so I'll try this first.' He pinches her mother's nose with thumb and finger and holds her chin with the other hand, then applies his mouth to hers, but quickly recoils. 'Something's obstructing . . .'

Slim takes a tissue from her shirt pocket and wipes the inside of her mother's mouth. 'Sorry.' She knows it's sick.

He applies his mouth again and empties two breaths into her, waits a beat before giving her another two. He alters his position so he can pull her chin back a little more and open the airway better and inflates her lungs a dozen more times. He is worried and shaking his head. 'I need your permission to do chest compressions. If she has a back or neck injury, it might paralyse her. You understand that?'

'Do it. Do whatever you have to.'

'You'll need to support her head.' She works her way round to sit cross-legged and cups her mother's head in her hands. The hair is matted with blood. She feels a wound of two or three centimetres long, yet when she looks down at the face that's still so miraculously unmarked by drink, she sees no suffering. Diana Parsons wears an expression of pained amusement, as though someone has made a feeble joke. Salt lifts her shoulders with great care, arranges her legs and arms.

'You okay?' he asks.

'Yes, go for it.'

He rises above her to give maximum force to the hands crossed at the centre of her chest and starts pumping. The violence of this surprises Slim. She's worried that her mother's ribs will snap like kindling under this pounding but says nothing. After a minute or so, he puts his ear to her breast, shakes his head, then moves the heel of his left hand a few centimetres higher and continues. With the rhythm of the downward thrusts,

he intones, 'I'm going to . . . bring you back, lady . . . if it's the last thing . . . I do.'

Slim catches herself processing her mother's death. Does she love her? Certainly not for the last few months during which she's been on ice, based here while an investigation establishes the facts of the incident on a jet over the Balkans and decides what to do with her. What her mother terms Slim's chilly, practical side now kicks in. A few weeks back, her mother muttered into her glass, 'They won't have to look far for the person to switch off my life support, will they, dear?' With a haste that surprises Slim, she now considers what would need to be done with the house, the bills, the bank accounts and the gardener who never showed up. And just for one hopeless second, she wondered how she was going to tell brother Matthew. That was fantasy, of course. Matthew was gone. Years of private investigators and her mother's own erratic searches had found nothing. He'd made sure he'd never be found – that, or he was dead. Diana believed he was alive; Slim doubted it. What hurt was how little of himself he had left them – some photographs, a wardrobe of clothes, drawings from his entry to the Royal College, an arresting self-portrait and, in the case of his younger sister, a nickname given to her during her chubby teen years. Matthew's absence weighed heavily. It was the reason her mother drank, surrendering completely to the bottle during lockdown. They both knew why she drank, but nothing was said. It never bloody was.

'Wait!' whispers Salt. His head is on her mother's bosom, eyes staring, holding his breath. He tears open more of the blouse and presses his ear to the skin just above her bra. 'I've got something. She's coming back.' After a few minutes more of CPR, yet without a cough, jolt, or the least dramatic sign of a return to life, Diana is breathing regularly and her pulse appears quite strong. Salt looks Slim in the eye for the first time. 'She's a tough one.'

For forty-five minutes they wait for the ambulance, packing the wound on her head with a hand towel and holding her, keeping her warm and comfortable. Her breathing grows shallow at one point. Salt does another round of mouth to mouth, and Slim sees her mother's whole chest rise with each blast from his lungs. Eventually she lets out a kind of wail that echoes in the stairwell. They look up. A blue light is flashing in the hall. Paramedics bring oxygen, a scoop stretcher, and a head and neck stabiliser to the landing and are followed by Mills, lugging three large medical kit bags and making a meal of it. A small man with pointed ears and a medical mask too big for his face kneels by her