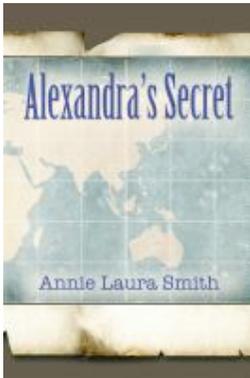


Alexandra's Secret



Annie Laura Smith



*In **Alexandra's Secret**, the reader is plunged into the murky and dangerous world of the Intelligence Operations during World War II. The Office of Strategic Services (OSS) drops Agent Alexandra Cockrell behind enemy lines on a dangerous and vital mission to recover and destroy a vital map. The fate of the largest invasion force in history - Operation Dragoon in Southern France - hangs in the balance, and eighteen-year-old Alexandra must prevail against impossible odds.*

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Chapter One

*Wednesday, February 23, 1944, Baltimore & Annapolis Train Station,
Baltimore, MD*

Alexandra Cockrell gave her parents a long, tight hug before she boarded the train for Buffalo, N.Y. There she would have to make connections for another train to Oshawa, Canada. Her final destination was Camp X, a top-secret, paramilitary training base for British Special Operations Executive (SOE) and American Office of Strategic Services (OSS) secret agents.

The existence of Camp X was a closely guarded secret, and known about only inside the American and British intelligence communities. Those in the know consisted of a few hundred. Alexandra would have preferred an assignment to the American training facility, Area B, near D.C. That OSS base was closer to her Baltimore home, but the specific training she required was only available at Camp X.

After she released her parents from the embrace, her mother said, “Our thoughts and prayers will be with you.”

“I know, Mom,” Alexandra replied, her blue eyes glistening with tears. She would probably not see her parents again until after the end of the war.

“Do call us if they allow phone calls,” her father encouraged.

Alexandra nodded and boarded the train, giving one final wave to her parents. She tried to force a smile because this training at Camp X had been her choice. Since she was only 18-years-old, she never

dreamed she would be accepted. But her exceptional academic record, award winning sports participation, and Belgian heritage made her a perfect OSS candidate. She was also multilingual in all of the western European languages, and knew the cultures well.

Her motives were patriotic and deeply personal. Two years earlier the Nazis had plundered her grandparents' farm located on the border of Belgium near Lille, France. The Nazis had brutally killed them both. She desperately wanted to save other Europeans from a similar fate and avenge their deaths. Becoming an OSS agent seemed the best way.

The train was filled with military personnel no doubt headed overseas. She found an aisle seat midway in the coach, sat down and dropped her small duffel bag by her side. The OSS had specified the few items she should bring. Her orders said they would provide for all of her needs. She looked at her seat companion, who was fast asleep. A first lieutenant, he wore an Army Air Force uniform,

Would he be headed for war-torn Europe, too?

During the long train ride, Alexandra mulled over the upcoming training. From the books she had read, she was aware the physical training exercises and obstacle courses would be tough, but that wasn't her main concern. The OSS would test her psychologically and for situational awareness. Those were the things she wondered and, perhaps, worried a bit about.

Her seatmate awakened from his sound sleep just as the train rolled into Buffalo.

"Are we in Oshawa now?" he asked.

"No, we're in Buffalo, but we change trains here for Oshawa," Alexandra replied.

"Thanks." The lieutenant eyed her and smiled. "That makes us traveling companions. I'm Greg Moore." He extended his hand.

"Alexandra Cockrell," she replied, shaking the lieutenant's hand.

He's a very handsome officer, Alexandra thought, hoping her face wasn't turning red at that thought.

Alexandra and the officer left the coach, and made their way to the boarding area for the train bound for Oshawa. Their new coach was sparsely occupied.

Greg looked around and said, "Not too many of us headed that way."

When they arrived in Oshawa, a Royal Canadian Air Force Military Policeman stood on the platform and motioned them over. Wordlessly, he pointed to their names on a clipboard.

"Yes, I'm Alexandra Cockrell and this is 1st Lt. Moore," Alexandra assured the MP.

The MP looked up at them. "No talking, miss. If you'll both please follow me."

He led them to a jeep and waived them in.

The drive to Camp X took about thirty-five minutes over rough roads and across thickly forested country. The camp was a 275-acre farm bordering Lake Ontario between Oshawa and the town of Whitby. It became operational December 6th, 1941, the day before the Japanese attacked Pearl Harbor, as the first operational secret agent training base in North America. American OSS agents now trained with British SOE agents at their paramilitary training installation.

When at last they drove into the compound, Alexandra looked at the snow-covered ground and forest of snow-tinged trees. The scene was a landscape worthy of a postcard. But that scenic view belied the true nature of the paramilitary training camp.

The MP stopped at the Administration Building. "You get out here, miss." Inside the clerk handed her a sheaf of papers and a regulation black US Government pen. Dutifully, Alexandra completed all of the blanks on the multitude of forms and handed them back.

The clerk pointed to the supply room "The supply clerk will issue you bedding and uniforms. Once you get your gear, head over to the woman's barracks and get settled. Dinner is between 1700 and 1900 hours. Breakfast is from 0500—0630. You are to report to the auditorium no later than 0700 with a notebook and pencil."

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Thursday, February 24—Wednesday, May 3, 1944, British Special Operations Executive (SOE) Camp X, between Whitby and Oshawa, Canada

The next morning, Alexandra found the auditorium without trouble, but was surprised to see only five other trainees waiting for the orientation session. The Camp Director came in and gave a succinct orientation about the camp, and outlined the 10-week schedule of activities on the blackboard. She read the schedule carefully. It was a daunting schedule of intense work.

“These activities are developmental in nature,” he said. “But you must pass every section. Do not miss any training—or you will repeat it with the class behind you. 1st Lt. Moore, please stand.”

Alexandra was surprised to hear Greg’s name called.

“1st Lt. Moore will be your survival training instructor,” the director continued. “Pay attention to his instructions. He has your safety paramount in mind while you’re in the wilderness. And his skills might just save your life one day.”

Greg smiled at Alexandra and sat down.

Another man entered the room and advised, “My name is Dr. Nat. I administer the psychological tests. It’s ladies first, and since we only have one, Miss Cockrell, please follow me.” He led her into another room, pointed to a desk, and handed her a packet of cardboard covered in ink-blots.

“Miss Cockrell, We’ll start with the ink-blot test. Please look at the cardboard and tell me what you see.”

The ink-blots didn’t really look like anything, but Alexandra gave the most reasonable answers she could think of. The concentration and tension test, however, captured her imagination. She had to hold a thin 1/8th inch copper rod by the insulated handle, and keep in in the center of a wire ring the size of a dime. In the meantime Dr. Nat kept barking orders to her. She had to hold the rod in the center of the ring without touching the metal, and repeat word for word his orders.

Her first attempts failed miserably as the loud buzzer sounded each time the rod touched the ring. Finally, she got into the rhythm of

the exercise, and was able to hold the rod in the center of the ring for three minutes. Her level of concentration and flawless memory allowed her to repeat all of the orders verbatim as she held the rod stable.

During the first week, her athletic background allowed her to breeze through the physical assessments. She even outperformed the other five trainees. The martial arts training sessions were a bit harder, but she relaxed when she realized the trainer would not actually try to kill her. She became immersed in the arms, sabotage, escape and evasion, subversion, deception, intelligence, communications, and survival activities. She knew all of these areas would be necessary to help people in German-occupied Europe, and vital for her own survival.

In the second and third week, she qualified on the 1903 Springfield bolt action rifle, the Thompson submachine gun, and the .45-calibre automatic pistol. As a young girl, she had loved to hunt pheasants with her father. Those experiences had served her well.

Her rifle instructor commented, "Miss Cockrell, with your skill, you could be a sniper."

Alexandra nodded but the thought revolted her.

If she had to kill, let it be in self-defense.

Week four brought about communications training. She zipped through the Morse code instruction, and had little trouble tapping out and reading messages. Alexandra found the suitcase radio used by European resistance members fascinating. It was small yet light, weighing only 10 kilograms. The OSS dropped these powerful radios by parachute into the occupied countries. It would likely be her lifeline, and the only communication while on assignment behind enemy lines.

"Be wary of the Gestapo Radio Direction-Finding, or RDF trucks," the instructor warned. "They can intercept signals and, through direction finding techniques, determine your exact location. Possession of a radio carries a death sentence."

Alexandra shuddered. The reality of what she was getting into was becoming more apparent. She thought of her grandparents, and was still committed to do the job, whatever it took.

Jump training consumed the next two weeks. She learned how to exit an aircraft while in flight, how to land, and stash her parachute gear so the Germans were less likely to find it. The jumps varied with some at 500 feet with a static line while others were at 10,000 feet with a ripcord. She landed in trees, open land, and even water. Alexandra hated the latter, as she was always numb from cold when they pulled her out of the water.

Her least favorite activity was survival training where she spent several days isolated in a remote area with the five other trainees. They had to forage for food, and drink pond water.

1st Lt. Moore's company was some consolation. He was a good instructor, and understood survival training well. He gave them Halazone tablets to sterilize the pond water, and kept them from getting sick.

After a final strenuous hike through the woods, Alexandra sat under a tree, and sipped from her canteen. 1st Lt. Moore sat down beside her and asked, "Is the training what you thought it would be?"

"More," she replied. She pushed her damp hair from her forehead. "I never realized before the extent of what an OSS agent has to learn."

"It's more than an Army officer has to know," Greg admitted. "We're generally fighting the enemy, not trying to help civilians fight them or escape capture."

Alexandra thought of her grandparents. "My grandparents were killed by the Nazis in Belgium a couple of years ago. Maybe I can help somebody else's grandparents escape."

Greg looked at her for a long moment, "I wouldn't share that with any other cadre. If they think you're on some personal vendetta, you'll never get an assignment. You'll be stuck here training others."

"Is that what happened to you?"

Greg looked away. "Yes, but anyway, you'll be a better agent than me." He stood and looked around. "Okay, ladies and gentlemen, break time is over. On your feet."

Alexandra stood with a groan and looked Greg in the face. "Thanks for the tip. Will you be in here long?"

"I'm sorry that information is on a need to know basis. But I'm sure our paths will cross again somewhere. You never know."

Alexandra cringed. She had committed her first intelligence blunder.

One does not ask questions of other agents, nor reveal one's own circumstances.

He laughed and looked around at their remote surroundings. "I don't think there are any Nazi spies in these woods," he said. "My future hasn't been compromised."

"Good," Alexandra whispered, still embarrassed by her mistake.

"Graduation is tomorrow," he said. "Are you ready for your first assignment?"

"As ready as I'll ever be," Alexandra admitted.

"You'll do fine," he assured her.

"I look forward to seeing you again in the future," she said as she joined the others for their return to the compound and the graduation ceremony.

Major General Bill Donovan, the head of OSS, stood in front of a microphone on a platform on the grounds of the Camp. The six trainees sat on wooden benches in front of the platform. Their instructors sat behind them.

"My message will be brief," General Donovan said. "You have completed 10 weeks of rigorous training to prepare you for the unknown that you will encounter in German-occupied Europe. Each of you is a credit to our organization, and we look forward to serving with you. Your status as an OSS Agent is Top Secret as is your diploma. Those of you that win citations will never see them because they are classified. You've just entered a dark and dangerous world.

Annie Laura Smith

Do your best and keep faith with your handlers and fellow agents. Godspeed!”

The graduates stood as a group, and Donovan left the platform. Alexandra looked around at the asbestos shingled huts that served as barracks, surrounded by sloping farm land that had been her home for 10 weeks. Sunlight reflecting from the snow-covered ground added a brilliant hue to the scene.

She felt an enormous sense of relief that her training was over—she had succeeded in becoming an OSS agent. She would be leaving the next day to report to OSS Headquarters in Washington, D.C. Her first assignment would no doubt be a mission to Europe.

Thursday, May 4, 1944, British Special Operations Executive (SOE) Camp X, between Whitby and Oshawa, Canada

The pounding on the barracks’ door awakened Alexandra from a deep sleep. She grabbed her robe from the foot of the cot and threw it on. The early Canadian morning was cold. When she opened the door, the camp’s radio operator handed her a message. She groggily read it in the light of his flashlight.

OFFICE OF STRATEGIC SERVICES HEADQUARTERS

London, England

04 May, 1944

Alexandra Cockrell report to SOE Training Camp, Altrincham

NLT 08 May—Mark Lambert, Director

Report to a special SOE Training Camp in England no later than May 8th?

“A PT boat will take you to the States in one hour,” the radio operator advised. “A plane will take you from there to the capitol and you’ll for England from Andrews Air Force Base.”

Puzzled, Alexandra quickly dressed and went to the mess hall for breakfast. None of the others in training were there. She was glad they had opened it early for her. She ate alone, and headed to the boat dock. An OSS Maritime Unit PT boat awaited her. She climbed aboard, and

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pulled her coat tightly around her. Anxiety and the chill of the early morning engulfed her.

The PT boat sliced through the rough waters of Lake Ontario. Halfway across the lake she saw lights twinkling from Toronto, some 30 miles to the east, and others on the American shore to the south. Darkness still concealed Camp X on the shore behind them.

Thursday-Saturday, May 4-6, 1944, OSS Headquarters, Washington, D.C. and Keflavik Airport, Iceland

After arriving in D.C. and getting only a few hours of sleep overnight, Alexandra spent a short time in the OSS Headquarters in the capitol before she left for England to receive the special training. A military vehicle took her to Andrews Air Force Base where she boarded a B-17 along with another agent, and a replacement crew for the Eighth Air Force stationed in the United Kingdom. The plane took off in the early morning light on Friday, and headed for Iceland to refuel at Keflavik Airport. They spent the night there, and then flew on to England on Saturday along the northern route. She was relieved that the rest of Saturday after her arrival in England and Sunday would be time off from training so she could recover from the time change.

Sunday, May 7, 1944, Office of Strategic Services (OSS) Headquarters, London, England

Alexandra was not surprised to find OSS Headquarters in London a buzz of activity when she stopped by to check in, and make arrangements to go to the training base at Altrincham.

Director Lambert greeted her and advised, "We have an agent jumping tomorrow morning. You can join him at dawn and get that requirement off your schedule."

Alexandra only nodded.

Why did she need more parachute experience after her extensive training at Camp X?

Annie Laura Smith

The director, apparently reading her mind, added, “The training jumps here will be more like those you will have on the continent. There’s a military vehicle leaving here for Altrincham at 1400 hours. Wait in the lobby about that time. You will be contacted there when the transportation arrives.”

Alexandra left the director’s office, and after stopping in the cafeteria for lunch waited in the lobby as directed.

Monday, May 8, 1944, Special Operations Executive (SOE) Training Camp, Altrincham, England

The Jumpmaster helped the agents strap on their gear harnesses at dawn. As he tugged on Alexandra Cockrell’s harness, she mused again, *Why more water landing, especially here?*

Alexandra had been through two weeks of parachute training in Canada at Camp X. She had landed safely into Lake Ontario’s icy cold water on numerous occasions. Each time seemed chillier than the last.

Alexandra looked over at Terry Larson, the other OSS jumper. Larson was tall, dark and very handsome—and he knew it. He would probably make many conquests at camp, but she would not be one. She had no intention of mixing her duties with her personal life. There would be time enough for romance after the war—if she lived.

Suddenly, Larson looked up and winked, “Caught you looking.”

Larson’s easy smile did little to ease Alexandra’s embarrassment, and she quickly looked away.

The jumpers followed the Jumpmaster to a C-47 aircraft and boarded. They were the lone cargo today, and the jumpers took their seats in silence. The crew chief closed the door, and gave thumbs up to the pilot. Soon the obsolete twin engine transport lumbered into the air with the rising sun.

As the plane gained altitude, the village of Altrincham came into view. Alexandra gazed down at the mansion and grounds of the Beamish Hall Estate, and the early morning sunlight glistening off the surface of a nearby lake. It reminded her of Lake Ontario. Idly, she

wondered how cold a lake in northwestern England would be this time of year. The plane circled the lake a few times, and then flew toward their watery drop zone.

The crew chief stood, opened the jump door, and signaled to the Jumpmaster. The Jumpmaster stood, checked that the door was safe, and then motioned for the jumpers to stand. Burdened with fifty pounds of parachute equipment, Alexandra struggled to her feet. Larson rose easily and stood behind her. They reached up and clipped their static lines to a cable running the length of the cabin.

Together they shuffled to the exit intently eyeing the adjacent red and green jump lights. The light switched from red to green, and the Jumpmaster shouted, "Stand in the door." Alexandra moved to the opening. The prop blast seemed to tug at her, but she resisted until the Jumpmaster tapped her on the shoulder and yelled, "Go!"

She pulled herself through into the prop blast. It slammed against her as she gripped her reserve with both hands and fell. She'd never gotten used to the drop. It felt like she'd left her stomach in the plane. As she fell, she counted aloud, "One thousand, two thousand, three thousand, four—"

The shock of the parachute opening interrupted her count. As the parachute deployed, it jerked hard at her harness. She looked up to see the wonderful sight of a billowing cloud parachute canopy overhead. Alexandra sighed and shifted her concentration down to the lake below. She judged that she had about ten seconds until impact.

Unbuckling her chest strap, she pushed her reserve aside, grasped her leg clasps, and looked at the horizon. Jumpers who looked down often misjudged the distance to the water. Sometimes they fell a hundred feet or more to their deaths. Alexandra knew the trick of a water landing was to release your leg clasps the instant your boots hit the water—then arch your back and throw up your arms to clear the parachute and harness. As she dropped, she wondered again how water could be so hard.

Wham! Her boots hit, she released her harness clasps, and arched into the lake. Clear of the entangling parachute risers, Alexandra

opened her eyes to a murky green world, but she could see the surface about ten feet above. She kicked hard towards the light, but at a diagonal from the 'chute's shadow. Once on the surface, and free of the parachute, she pulled the cords and inflated her Mae West life vest.

It's colder here than it was in Lake Ontario.

As she started to swim to shore, she casually looked around for Larson. He was nowhere to be seen. She spun around and carefully took in the entire lake. She saw his 'chute splayed across the water.

But where was that good looking lout?

Alexandra checked and felt the reassuring presence of her boot knife, and began to swim toward the 'chute. In full uniform and boots it was exhausting. Finally, as she got closer, she saw Larson's limp body tangled in the risers.

When she reached him, Alexandra inflated Larson's Mae West and rolled him over so his face was out of the water. He was not breathing. She pulled him close, pinched his nose and covered his mouth with hers. As she blew life giving air into his lungs, she thought about the irony.

She'd had no intention of ever being involved with Larson—and now look at her.

Dismissing the thought she drew her boot knife, cut Larson free, and started to tow him to shore. When her boots touched the bottom, she stood and dragged Larson's limp form ashore. Still unconscious, Larson had yet to take a breath. Alexandra continued mouth-to-mouth resuscitation.

Finally, after several minutes his eyes fluttered open, and he sucked in a big breath. Alexandra restrained Larson as he coughed, and then helped him roll to the side as he vomited lake water. After he finished and his breathing stabilized, Alexandra helped Larson to a sitting position.

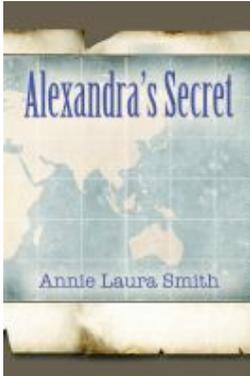
Gasping for breath, Terry started to say, "I couldn't get loose..."

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“Easy, you’re fine. No talking...just breathe.” She continued to assist him, until the camp cadre arrived to carry Larson to the infirmary.

After they took Larson away, Alexandra stood and gathered her wits. A small crowd of students that had gathered started to disperse, leaving her alone with her thoughts.

Her OSS training had kicked in without conscious thought. Special Operations Executive—SOE—ran the training at Camp X. Her time in Canada seemed far away, and a very long time ago. “*Fully operational,*” she waited in England for her first assignment.



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