



JANA RICHARDS

ROMANCE SAMPLER

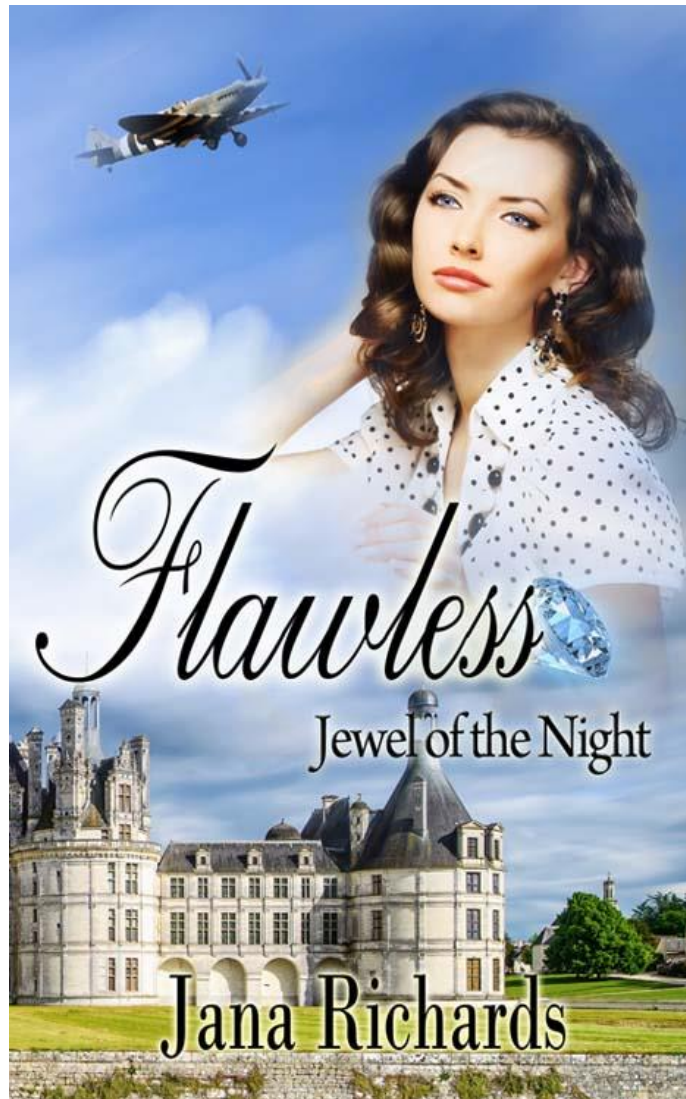
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Flawless

France, 1942. The world is at war. The Nazis have stolen the infamous blue diamond, *Le Coeur Bleu*, intending to barter it for weapons that will destroy the Allies. Jewel thief Hunter Smith is given a choice; help the French Resistance steal back the diamond and avenge the death of his best friend, or stay locked up in an English prison. He chooses revenge.

Resistance fighter Madeleine Bertrand's husband died when he was betrayed by Hunter Smith. How can she now pretend to be married to the arrogant American? How can she betray Jean Philippe's memory by her passionate response to Hunter's kisses? Neither is prepared for the maelstrom of attraction that erupts between them. To survive they must uncover the mysteries of the past and conquer the dangers of the present. But first Madeleine must decide if her loyalties lie with her dead husband and the Resistance or with the greatest love of her life.



Chapter One

Pentonville Prison, London, April 1942

Down the hall, the heavy iron door creaked open, then closed again with a clang. Footsteps echoed on the stone floor, growing louder as they approached his prison room. When the footsteps suddenly stopped, Hunter Smith opened his eyes, surprised. In the eighteen months he'd been in this God-forsaken place, no one had visited him, not his so-called friends, and certainly not his parents.

He turned his head. A neat little man in an impeccable black suit and bowler hat waited patiently for the guard to unlock the barred gate of his cell.

"He shouldn't give you any trouble, Guvnor," the guard said as he opened the grate. "Not like some is in 'ere. Quick to steal your purse and slit yer throat for yer trouble, most of 'em. But I'll stay close by, just in case."

"That won't be necessary." The little man's voice reflected British public schools and a cultured upbringing. Hunter hated him immediately. "Please wait behind the outer door. I'll call you when I'm ready."

"If that's what you want, Guvnor." The guard shrugged, relocked Hunter's cell, and retreated beyond the iron door with a clanking of keys. When the door had banged shut behind him, the little man spoke again.

"I have a proposition for you."

Hunter sat up, wincing as his feet touched the floor and his back protested in pain. The lumpy, too-short cot caused him no end of aggravation. "Is that so?"

"I want you to steal a diamond for me."

Hunter couldn't restrain a burst of mocking laughter. The irony of the little man's request would be funny if it weren't so pathetic.

"You want me to steal a diamond?" He rose and swept an arm around to encompass his prison cell. "I'd love to accommodate you, sir, but I'm afraid I'm a bit indisposed at the moment."

The little man surveyed the room, wrinkling his nose in distaste as his gaze met the bucket in the corner that served as Hunter's toilet. "If you agree to my request, I can have you released."

Hunter's heart rate tripled, but he kept his face neutral. He'd do almost anything to get out of this hell hole. Anything but steal another diamond.

He resumed his prone position on the cot. "I'm sorry you've wasted your time in coming here. I've turned over a new leaf. Seen the error of my ways." He flung one arm over his eyes. "Besides, I'm a lousy thief. That's how I ended up in here. I'm no longer interested in stealing jewels."

"I'm sorry to hear that."

Hunter waited to hear the man call for the guard, waited for the footsteps that would signal he had left the cell, but all remained silent. He lifted his arm and opened his eyes. The little man stood patiently, waiting. Hunter rose to his feet once more.

"Who the hell are you?"

"Allow me to introduce myself. My name is Alastair Campbell, and I am the head of the Special Operations Executive."

"Bully for you." Hunter had no idea what the Special Operations Executive was, but despite himself he was intrigued.

Campbell read his mind. "The SOE sends operatives to France, where they make contact with the French Resistance. We supply the Resistance with arms and two-way radios. The information they've supplied us on the movements of the Nazis in occupied France has been invaluable."

"Perhaps if I were British I might be interested in joining your little band of merry men. But I'm not British, and I'm not interested."

Arms folded, Hunter stared down at Campbell. His best efforts to intimidate the much smaller man were having little effect. Campbell smiled indulgently, like a kindly head-master at a stubborn and not very bright student.

"I'm well aware of your American citizenship. I'm also aware that you've spent a good portion of your life living in France and that you speak perfect French."

That he'd lived in France wasn't exactly a secret, but the idea that someone had gone to the trouble to find out unsettled Hunter. What else did this little man know about him?

"Dropping into occupied France to have tea with the Resistance doesn't exactly sound like a good career move. I hear the Nazis don't take kindly to spies. I'm afraid I'll have to decline your lovely offer." Again Hunter lay on his cot and closed his eyes, waiting for Campbell to leave.

"Not even for *Le Coeur Bleu*?"

Hunter's eyes snapped open, his blood pounding in his ears. "What do you know about The Blue Heart?"

"Only that it is one of the most famous and rare diamonds in the world, over 30 carats, and said to be flawless."

Hunter rose from his cot and paced his small cell, heart racing. "Ah, finally something you don't know. *Le Coeur Bleu* has a small flaw, an inclusion visible only with a jeweler's loupe."

Campbell inclined his head. "My mistake. I bow to your superior knowledge of the stone."

He met Campbell's calm stare. He doubted this man ever made mistakes. "What else do you know about the diamond?"

"I know the diamond is reputed to have magical powers. Some even say it is cursed."

"You don't really believe in magical powers, do you?" Hunter scoffed.

Campbell lifted one shoulder in a delicate shrug. "Perhaps, perhaps not. Do you think your friend Jean Philippe Bertrand believed in magic?"

All the air rushed out of Hunter's lungs and he struggled to breathe. "What do you know about Jean Philippe?"

"That he came into possession of *Le Coeur Bleu* and was murdered for it by the Nazis."

Hunter dropped heavily onto his cot, shock and pain turning his knees to water. Snippets of the telegram he'd received from his best friend a few weeks before his arrest flashed in his head. *Need to buy Heartstone times two from Jewish refugee. Desperate. Send cash.* Hunter had immediately wired JP the money to buy the Heartstone, the name by which *Le Coeur Bleu* was sometimes known. He never heard from Jean Philippe again. In all the months of his captivity he'd clung to the hope that Jean Philippe was safe. But now that hope was dashed.

"Dead? You're sure?"

"Yes. The SOE is very well connected in France. I can assure you, your friend was killed for *Le Coeur Bleu*."

Guilt flowed through Hunter's veins like a poison. If he hadn't sent the money, JP wouldn't have had the diamond and the Nazis would have had no reason to kill him.

Campbell stepped closer to Hunter's cot, determination glittering in his eyes. "I'm giving you the opportunity to avenge your friend's death. Will you take it, Mr. Smith?"

Anger filled Hunter, making him pace his cell once more. How dare this man use JP's death for his own purposes? "How is stealing The Blue Heart going to avenge Jean Philippe's death? It's just a stone, Mr. Campbell. Very pretty, very valuable, but just a rock. Is stealing it going to bring him back?"

"No, it won't," Campbell conceded, "but it will hurt the Nazis immensely. I can assure you that taking *Le Coeur Bleu* from them will reduce their capacity to fight, Mr. Smith. It may even shorten the war and provide the turning point we're looking for. Is this not what your friend would have wanted?"

As Hunter stared into Campbell's round face, he remembered the last stinging conversation he'd had with his friend. *"If you used your God-given talents for good instead of squandering them on party tricks, perhaps you'd be a lot happier. It's time to grow up, Hunter. For once in your life, be a man."*

Perhaps the time had finally come.

"How soon can I get out of here?"

Campbell smiled in satisfaction. "Follow me."

* * *

The full moon lit the night sky, showing the way. When the co-pilot turned in his seat and grinned at Hunter, he looked more like a boy on an adventure than a soldier on a deadly-serious spy mission.

"This is where it gets interesting," he said. "We're now over occupied France. We should be at the rendezvous point in approximately ten minutes."

Hunter nodded and stared out the window of the rear cockpit to the land below. Not a single light burned in the French countryside, giving the eerie impression of abandonment, as if everyone had fled. Or been killed.

He shook off the disturbing sensation. He knew that somewhere down there his French contacts waited for him and for the load of arms and ammunition accompanying him. The plane itself had made several of these excursions into occupied France to pick up or drop off operatives and bring much-needed supplies to the Resistance. The sturdy little Lysander had the advantage of being able to land and take off on short, make-shift runways and could fly low enough to be invisible to radar. The perfect spy plane.

The pilots consulted their maps and compasses, their only navigational aids aside from the full moon. Suddenly, the co-pilot pointed toward the ground below.

"There's the spot. Prepare for landing."

Hunter peered out the window once more. Four lights flickered beneath them, marking a crude landing strip. The plane circled once before making a bone-jarring landing on what must have been a farmer's field.

As the plane came to a stop, a car skidded to a halt beside them and three people jumped out. Hunter had been prepared for the landing by the SOE at his three-week training session. He grabbed his knapsack and the suitcase-sized two-way radio he was delivering and opened the rear cockpit door, descending as quickly as he could down the ladder that had been fixed to the port side of the plane for quick entries and escapes. Two men unloaded rifles from the large tank under the belly. Another person retrieved and extinguished the torches used to light the plane's way to the landing. In a matter of a few minutes, the arms were loaded in the trunk of the car, and the Lysander began its taxi down the field, picking up speed until it

lifted off the ground. Within seconds, the plane disappeared into the night sky, its black matte finish making it all but invisible.

“Dépêchez-vous! Get in the car!”

Hunter tossed his gear into the back seat behind the front passenger. The rest of the crew piled in, and the driver took off, tires spinning.

No one spoke as they raced away. Everyone knew the danger. Though the Lysander might be invisible to radar, the Germans would have heard its approach and were likely searching for them right now. If they were caught by a German patrol with arms stowed in the trunk, it was all over.

A few moments later the car came to a screeching halt, dust flying all around it. The driver turned to Hunter.

“Get out! Quickly!”

They hadn’t mentioned this in the three-week training course.

When he hesitated, the driver shouted again. “Get out!”

Hunter grabbed the radio and his knapsack and wrenched open the car door, stumbling in his haste to get out. As soon as he slammed the door shut, the car took off again, pebbles and dirt flying. He shielded his eyes from the onslaught. What the hell was he supposed to do now?

When the dust cleared, he realized he wasn’t alone. Someone stood just down the road, waiting. Hunter could only hope this was part of the plan, that this person was friend rather than foe. He straightened his shoulders, picked up the radio, and moved forward.

For a long moment the person stood watching him, saying nothing. In frustration, Hunter broke the silence.

“Hello? Can you help me?” he said in French.

“Monsieur Smith?”

Hunter hesitated, surprised. A woman’s voice. He hadn’t expected his contact to be a woman.

“Oui.”

It had been a while since he’d spoken French. Hell, when he’d been in prison he’d barely spoken at all. The words still felt rusty on his tongue, but the French of his childhood, his childhood with Jean Philippe, was coming back to him quickly.

“We must get back to town before the sun comes up,” the woman said as she started briskly down a dirt path off the main road, not waiting for him. Hunter hoisted his knapsack onto his back and picked up the radio, hurrying to catch up with her.

"You know my name, but I don't know yours."

"It's Madeleine."

"Where are you taking me?"

"To Lille. It is about five kilometers from here. You will stay with Monsieur Gagnon until he finds you another place to stay. You came here to look for work. You will present yourself at Chateau de Maisoneuve tomorrow as a gardener. The Germans are always looking for someone to do their dirty work for them."

Her words came out clipped, as if she were annoyed with him for not knowing all the details of his cover already. Her attitude irritated him.

"Look, Madeleine, in their infinite wisdom, Special Operation Executive didn't bother to tell me anything about my cover, so don't blame me."

"What exactly do you know about being a gardener?" She picked up her pace, and Hunter had to lengthen his stride to keep up with her.

"What's to know? I stick a shovel into the ground occasionally and spread manure. It's just a cover. I'm here for *Le Coeur Bleu*, not the roses."

Madeleine threw up her hands. "Ah, yes, *Le Coeur Bleu*. That's all you're really interested in, isn't it?"

"Of course I'm interested in it. Getting it away from the Germans is the whole reason I'm here."

"You mean stealing it."

What was her problem? "Yes, I mean stealing it. You don't think the Nazis are going to hand it over if I say 'pretty please,' do you?"

Madeleine stopped suddenly and spun to face him. The sky had lightened just enough for him to see the fury in her eyes. "You're nothing but a common thief. I know all about you, Monsieur Smith. I know you were imprisoned for jewel theft in London. I know the only reason you got out was because Monsieur Campbell needed you to steal this jewel. You think it is better to steal *Le Coeur Bleu* than to rot in jail. Do you think this is a lark, a game we play here, Monsieur Smith? I can assure you, you will soon regret coming to France."

She turned on her heel and marched off, leaving Hunter to stare at her retreating back, angry and dumbfounded at her holier-than-thou attitude. He stalked after her once more.

"I can assure *you*, Mademoiselle, I already regret coming to France."

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Home Fires

Anne Wakefield travels halfway around the world for love. But when she arrives in Canada from England at the end of World War Two, she discovers the handsome Canadian pilot she'd fallen in love with has married someone else. Heartbroken, she prepares to return to London, though she has nothing left there to return to. Her former fiancé's mother makes a suggestion: marriage to her other son.

Badly wounded and scarred during the war, Erik Gustafson thinks he's a poor substitute for his brother. Although he loves Anne almost from the first time he sees her, he cannot believe she would ever be able to love him as he is – especially as he might be after another operation on his bad leg. Anne sees the beauty of his heart. The cold prairie winter may test her courage, but can she prove to Erik that her love for him is real?



Chapter One

October, 1945

Anne Wakefield checked the clock in the Emerald train station's waiting room, her stomach clenched with anxiety. She'd been waiting nearly an hour and there was no sign of Anders. With every second that passed, her fear increased. Had he been in an accident? Did his car break down? Or had he decided an English bride was no longer part of his plans?

The station master looked at her, then at his pocket watch, his eyebrows rising as if he too had his doubts about her fiancé. Anne turned away, embarrassed.

The last telegram she'd received from Anders said he would pick her up at the train station in his home town of Emerald, Saskatchewan, a tiny village on the Canadian prairies. From there he would take her the two miles to his family's farm. But he still hadn't arrived. She remembered Grace, one of the other young British women who'd traveled with her on the special war brides train across Canada. When they'd arrived in Toronto and her husband wasn't there to meet her, Grace phoned his home only to be told to go back to England because he didn't want her anymore. The Red Cross had made arrangements for Grace to go back to England. Anne closed her eyes and took a deep breath. Was Grace's fate to be hers as well?

The door to the station opened and a tall, powerfully built man entered. Anders! She jumped to her feet and took several steps toward him before she realized the man wasn't her fiancé. Though he had the same broad shoulders, and carried his height with the same pride, this man used a cane and walked with a pronounced limp. When he removed his cap she saw his hair was dark brown instead of blond like Anders's. A jagged scar ran down the left side of his face from temple to jawline. Profound disappointment made it almost impossible for her to speak.

"I'm...I'm sorry. I thought you were someone else."

"Are you Anne Wakefield?"

Anne lifted her head and looked into eyes the same icy blue as Anders's. But where her fiancé's eyes laughed and teased, this man wore an expression of seriousness. She wondered if he ever laughed.

"Yes, I'm Anne. Who are you? Do you know Anders? Do you know where he is?"

"I'm sorry, I should have introduced myself. I'm Erik Gustafson, Anders's brother. I'm sorry to be so late picking you up, but if you'll come with me, everything will be explained." He gestured toward her belongings. "Is this your suitcase?"

She put her hand on his arm to stop him from picking it up. "Wait, please. Where is Anders? Is he all right?"

"Yes, he's fine."

"Then why isn't he here?"

Erik glanced at the station master. Anne followed his gaze. The man nodded at them, making no effort to hide the fact that he was avidly listening to their conversation.

"This isn't the place," he said in a quiet voice. "If you come with me to the farm, my mother will explain everything."

Anne stared at him for a moment, dread building inside her. What news was so awful it had to be delivered in private?

She had little choice but to hear this news. She removed her hand from his arm and nodded. "The rest of my luggage is on the platform."

He picked up her suitcase. "Come with me."

Anne retrieved her coat and purse and followed him out the door while the station master directed a young man to carry her small trunk. Erik struggled with her suitcase, leaning heavily on his cane, but she stopped herself from offering to take it from him. Her wartime experience as a nurse had taught her that injured soldiers didn't want to be treated as invalids, or worse, as useless burdens.

She attempted some conversation. "Anders told me you'd been wounded and sent home, but he didn't say where you'd fought."

He gave her a sharp glance. "Dieppe."

She waited for him to say something more, but he was silent until they reached an old farm truck.

"Here we are," he said.

While Erik and the young man hoisted her luggage into the back, Anne climbed into the truck. A moment later Erik pulled himself up into the cab, a move that caused him pain, if the tight expression on his face was any indication. She looked away, not wanting to be caught staring. Though she'd just met Erik Gustafson she already knew he wanted no pity from her.

He drove out of Emerald and down a dusty dirt road bordered on both sides by tall pine trees and poplars whose golden leaves trembled in the wind. In places the forest dropped back to reveal a farmer's field or a hay meadow. This part of Saskatchewan was far different from the wide-open, empty plains of the south she'd seen earlier in her trip. The trees reminded her of the English countryside. A pang of homesickness struck, making her wonder why she'd ever left.

An awkward silence settled over the truck cab. Just when Anne had worked up the courage to ask how much farther to the farm, Erik pulled off the main road onto a tree-lined country lane. The branches parted to reveal a white, two-story house

with a wide veranda, ringed by a short hedge. A freshly painted red barn stood on the opposite side of the farmyard.

Erik stopped next to the house and slowly climbed from the cab, his movements stiff. Anne followed him, her stomach knotting in apprehension. Two women emerged from the house and came toward her. The older woman greeted her with a warm smile.

"You must be Anne," she said, grasping her hand. "Welcome to our farm. I'm Astrid Gustafson, Lars's mother."

"I'm glad to meet you, Mrs. Gustafson. Anders has told me so much about you."

"Please call me Astrid." She turned to the younger woman. "And this is my daughter Ingrid, Anders and Erik's sister."

Ingrid stretched out her hand, but offered no warmth in her welcome. After a perfunctory shake, she dropped her hand, leaving Anne feeling cold and confused. What had she done to deserve this animosity from Anders's sister?

"Where is Anders? Erik said you would explain everything."

Astrid averted her gaze, looking uncomfortable. "Please come inside the house. I have a letter for you from him."

Anne took a deep breath to calm her growing fears. After months of anticipation and yearning to begin her new life, all that awaited her was a letter. She followed Astrid into the house.

They passed through a porch containing a large box filled with firewood and then into an immaculate kitchen dominated by a cast iron woodstove. Anders had explained there was no electricity on the farm, nor was there a telephone or indoor plumbing. A row of cupboards lined one wall, with a bright red water pump perched next to a wash basin. White walls and sunny windows framed by yellow and white gingham curtains gave the kitchen a cheery expression.

Erik pulled out a chair for her. "Maybe you should sit."

Anne nodded, grateful for his consideration. Her shaking knees wouldn't hold her upright much longer.

Astrid retrieved a sealed letter from inside a cupboard. "This should explain everything."

Anne took it with trembling hands, removed the single page from the envelope and slowly unfolded it.

October 22, 1945

Dear Anne,

There's no easy way to say this, so I'm just going to jump in. I've married someone else. Signe and I have known each other since we were kids and when I got home I realized she was the one I wanted to marry. I'm sorry but that's the way it is.

I regret hurting you but I'm convinced a marriage between us would not have worked. Thank you for all the kindness you showed me in England. You're a great girl. Best of luck.

Anders

Anne read the letter quickly, then read it again, scarcely able to believe the words. Married! To someone else! Finally, she folded the letter and carefully placed it back in the envelope. She looked up at Astrid, shock and numbness making it difficult to breathe.

Astrid's blue eyes were full of sympathy. "I'm sorry. We just found out a short time ago from Signe's family. That's why Erik was late picking you up."

"Where is Anders now?"

"He and Signe have moved to the city, to Saskatoon. He got a job at a flour mill there."

"He must have told you about Signe," Ingrid accused. "He must have told you they were practically engaged before he left."

Anger began to build inside Anne. How could he do this to her?

Mostly he'd spoken of the farm, of his parents, his brother and sister and the fun they'd had growing up. He'd been homesick, and talking about the farm helped him through the worst times. When he'd received word his father had died, she'd held him while he cried.

But not once had he talked about a girl back home. If he had, she wouldn't be here now.

She got to her feet, her anger propelling her forward. "If you'll excuse me, I need to walk for a bit, to think."

"Are you sure, dear?" said Astrid. "I could make you some tea."

Anne almost smiled. How very English a sentiment to believe that a cup of tea could cure any ill. Coming from Anders's Norwegian-Canadian mother, it seemed strange, but somehow comforting.

"Thank you, but no." She turned toward the door. "I just need some air. I won't be long."

"But Anne—"

"Ma, let her go." Erik exchanged a glance with his mother.

As Anne turned to leave, her gaze met Erik's. The pity in his eyes made her want to lash out at him. She didn't want his damn pity. She wanted...she wanted...

She wanted the love and security of a family again. She wanted love that would never waver, no matter what.

Willing her knees to hold steady, she made her escape, pushing open the door and hurrying out to the garden. As soon as she reached the graveled yard, she broke into a run.

She ran until a stitch in her side prevented her from going any farther. She walked into the trees next to the lane, and sinking onto a carpet of dry leaves, she let the tears she'd been holding back overtake her.

Why couldn't Anders love her? Was everything they'd shared, every word of love a lie? How could he desert her so callously? Was there something wrong with her?

She cried until she had no tears left. Wiping her wet cheeks with the heel of her hand, she wondered what to do next. Where would she go? Her logical mind told her the only possible course of action was to return to London. Humiliation filled her when she thought of having to explain to everyone that her Canadian fiancé had rejected her. But there was no other solution. Once more she'd have to pick up the pieces of her life and carry on.

Anne pulled herself to her feet and looked around, realizing suddenly that she didn't know where she was. Which direction was the Gustafson farm?

She had no idea. Brushing dry leaves from her grey skirt and red cardigan, she walked back to the road. She looked both ways, sighed, and began to walk. She'd survived far worse in the last six years. She would survive this too.

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