

Praise for *Code Name Hélène*

‘Ariel Lawhon delivers in *Code Name Hélène*. This fully animated portrait of Nancy Wake – underground operative, charmer in red lipstick, loving wife and hard-hitting woman of her times, will fascinate readers of World War II history and thrill fans of fierce, brash, independent women, alike. A stark exploration of the remarkable difference one person, willing to rise in the face of fear, can make.’

**Lisa Wingate, #1 *New York Times* bestselling author
of *Before We Were Yours***

‘A compulsively readable account of a little-known yet extraordinary historical figure – Lawhon’s best book to date.’

Kirkus Reviews (starred review)

‘Lawhon throws readers into the middle of the action, as Nancy, under the alias Hélène, prepares to parachute from an RAF plane into France to help the Resistance in 1944 ...

Lawhon’s vivid, fast-paced narrative will keep readers turning the pages ... This entertaining tale does justice to Lawhon’s larger-than-life subject.’

Publishers Weekly

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*Code Name
Hélène*

ARIEL LAWHON



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Map of Nancy Wake's France by Mapping Specialists

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For:

My husband, Ashley. Forever. And for always.

Also,

*Sally Burgess, who told me we could no longer be friends
if I didn't write this story next.*

And,

*Elisabeth, who makes the dream come true.
Every. Single. Time.*

War is too important to be left to the generals.

—FRENCH PRIME MINISTER
GEORGES CLÉMENTEAU, 1917

Nancy Wake's France



NANCY GRACE AUGUSTA WAKE

Also Known As



the fighter

“Madame Andrée”



the smuggler

“Lucienne Carlier”



the spy

“Hélène”



the target

“The White Mouse”

PART ONE

Nancy Grace Augusta Wake

The power of a glance has been so much abused in love stories, that it has come to be disbelieved in. Few people dare now to say that two beings have fallen in love because they have looked at each other. Yet it is in this way that love begins, and in this way only.

—VICTOR HUGO, *LES MISÉRABLES*

Hélène

BENSON MILITARY AIRFIELD, ENGLAND

February 29, 1944

I have gone by many names.

Some of them are real—I was given four at birth alone—but most are carefully constructed personas to get me through checkpoints and across borders. They are lies scribbled on forged travel documents. Typed neatly in government files. Splashed across wanted posters. My identity is an ever-shifting thing that adapts to the need at hand.

Tonight, I am *Hélène* and I am going home.

It is February 29. Leap Day. The irony of this is not lost on me, because I am about to jump out of an aeroplane for the first time. I've only just been lifted into the belly of the Liberator bomber like a clumsily wrapped package. Me in slacks, blouse, and silk stockings beneath my coveralls, tin hat, and British army boots. The camel-haired coat and parachute pack don't do much to help the ensemble. But this isn't a fashion show and I'm not here to make friends, so I don't care that every man on this plane is looking at me as though I don't belong. Besides, I'm hungover. And I think I might throw up.

There are only four of us on this flight: an RAF pilot, a dispatcher, "Hubert"—my partner on this mission—and myself. A motley crew indeed. I settle into the jump seat across from Hubert and we watch with trepidation as the aperture in the floor closes. There's a grinding of gears and the clank of metal and then we're locked inside. I very much regret that third bottle of wine I shared with the boys

last night. Headquarters delayed the mission by an entire day so we would have extra time to memorize key details of our cover story, which meant that, for the second night in a row, we raucously celebrated our looming departure and likely death. By the end of it we were singing “Blood on the Risers” at the top of our lungs, and now I can’t get the stupid song out of my head.

“Gory, gory what a helluva way to die . . .,” I hum, only to find the pilot staring at me with a bemused grin. I shrug. It’s the truth. This *would be* a helluva way to die. Too late now, though, because all four engines shudder to life with an angry bellow.

I begin counting as the plane rumbles across the aerodrome. Ten. Twenty. Thirty—good grief, when will this thing ever get off the ground?—forty. And then my stomach drops as we lurch into the air like a drunken seabird. The Liberator heaves and rumbles its way into the low-hanging clouds over the English countryside, sounding all the while as though someone has tossed a pound of bolts into a meat grinder.

Once we’re through the clouds and the engines dim to a lesser roar, the dispatcher looks at me and shouts, “Witch?”

Under normal circumstances I would be offended, but Witch is my code name for this flight. I nod in the affirmative.

He turns back to his control panel and radios Command. “Witch on board”—a pause and then a glance at Hubert—“Pudding as well. Approximately two hours until the drop.”

Poor guy, it’s not his fault. He’s not been given our real code names, much less our *actual* names. Need to know, etcetera, etcetera. I make a face at Hubert and he grins. We’d argued over which of us had the worse handle. Mine is sexist but his is stupid, so in the end we declared it a draw.

“At least the plane is heated,” I say, but Hubert has settled into his jump seat, closed his eyes, and is trying to sleep. If he hears me he doesn’t let on. Hubert is not what you’d call a conversationalist.

I grow queasier as the Liberator bounces ever higher and I’m trying to decide whether to throw up now or later, when the dispatcher drops into the jump seat next to me.

“You don’t look like a witch. Is that really what they call you?” he asks.

“Sometimes they put a *b* in front.”

He’s American and Texan and therefore a gentleman, so it takes

him a moment to realize this is a joke. “My momma would yank a knot in my throat if I used either word for a lady.”

“Lucky for you I’ve rarely been accused of being a lady,” I say with a wink, and I haven’t been married so long that I don’t enjoy watching him blush.

The dispatcher looks at me a bit closer, taking in my strange attire. “We ain’t never dropped a woman before.”

“We?”

He nods toward the pilot. “We make this run three or four times a week. But you’re the first girl we’ve ever tossed out.”

“Get used to it, Tex. There are about ten coming up behind me.”

“Well, I hope you can do what the men haven’t.”

“Which is?”

“Get this war straightened out. I’d like to go home.”

He returns to his radio and I try to find a comfortable position. Unfortunately there is no such thing as sleep when you’re in the belly of a bomber rocking back and forth, trying not to puke. It’s enough for me to swear off booze altogether. Well, maybe I’ll just take a break. This is war, after all, and a girl has to find comfort where she can.

After several minutes of quietly willing my stomach to settle, something lands in my lap. I open my eyes and see a brown paper bag. Inside is a Spam sandwich.

Heaven help me.

I look up to find our pilot leaning halfway out of the cockpit, one hand on the yoke and the other extended toward me holding a canteen.

“Here!” he shouts. “Drink this. It will help.”

“That’s very kind, but—”

“Coffee is the best cure for airsickness,” he says, and then, “Drink it. You look awful.”

The truth is I feel several degrees worse than awful, so I unbuckle and scramble onto my knees to reach for the canteen. The pilot is big and sturdy. Deep, soulful eyes. I don’t typically go for the mustached type, but his is nice. If I weren’t hungover and married, I’d think him quite attractive. He offers me that same bemused smile, then returns to his duties when I’ve relieved him of the canteen and situated myself in the seat once again.

The coffee is hot and black, thick as tar. I take half of it slowly, like

medicine, and then use the rest to wash down the sandwich. At least he has been generous with the mayonnaise. Only when I've finished, my stomach is settled, and my ears are no longer popping does it occur to me that he has sacrificed his dinner for my sake.

As I wipe the crumbs off my lap I notice that the dispatcher is staring at my outfit. I look ridiculous. I know that. But everything I need for the next six months has to be carried into France, on my person, tonight. And there is no way to accomplish that without appearing homeless. Or possibly deranged.

Finally, he shakes his head, perplexed, but I'm used to it. I have that effect on men. Across the way, Hubert is sound asleep, head lolled to the side, snoring. I'm not sure what he's wearing underneath his coveralls, but I'd bet it's nondescript and civilian. Perhaps not so expensive as mine, but Hubert isn't the flashy type. He errs on the side of Stoic Brit with a Stiff Upper Lip. But his French is excellent, which is why he's on this mission.

I don't exactly sleep but I do finally settle into the flight, and an hour later the dispatcher taps me on the shoulder.

"We're thirty minutes out from the airfield. But stay buckled. The descent will be bumpy."

"Turbulence?"

"Nah. The Germans like to send their greetings as we come in over the coast."

"Are you telling me that they will be shooting at us?"

"Yes, ma'am. But don't worry. We've done this a hundred times and we ain't been hit yet."

I am about to audibly curse Major Buckmaster for withholding this bit of information when the first deafening boom shatters the air above us. *Bumpy* is, in fact, not the right word at all for what we experience. I'd have gone for horrific. Gut-mangling. Possibly lethal. The Liberator is tossed around like an empty bean can by fire from the antiaircraft artillery below—the *ack-ack* guns, as our dispatcher calls them—and I wonder if perhaps my life as a saboteur won't come to an abrupt halt right here, fifteen thousand feet above French soil. My temples pound. My stomach clenches. And a fine sweat rises across my brow. However, my life remains intact and the only thing I lose is my dinner, right there on the floor of the aeroplane. Our pilot is none too pleased to see that I've returned his offering of coffee and

Spam sandwich in considerably worse condition than he gave it to me. I'd extend him my sincerest apologies, but I'm too busy wiping my mouth on the sleeve of my coveralls. Hubert, awake now thanks to the gunfire, is shaking his head as though I've already failed my first important mission.

"Listen, if you don't want to do this we can take you back," the dispatcher says, eyeing the lumpy puddle near my feet.

"And go through all this nonsense again? The hell with that. Just get me to the drop point and let me off this bloody plane."

Before long, we leave the worst of the *ack-ack* fire behind and descend in a smooth, rapid glide over a dense forest. I see bonfires and a strange blinking light as the hour hand on my watch ticks over to one in the morning. It looks as though we're about to descend into the rim fires of hell, complete with a control tower to guide us in.

"What is that?" I ask, pointing out the window.

The dispatcher shrugs. "Could be your guys. Could be the Germans. We never really know for sure. And we don't stay to find out. The goal is not to get shot down, see?"

"Well, if it's not the Germans, they'll certainly see us coming. Someone has lit up the whole damn forest."

The SOE warned us that the Maquis are notoriously lax when it comes to security. But I never thought they'd announce our arrival by lighting up the drop zone like a carnival.

Hubert is on his feet, calmly attaching the static line of his parachute to the drop line connected to the plane. There's no room in the drop zone for both of us to land safely at once, so he's to go first.

We barrel toward a clearing atop a nearby hill, flying a mere four hundred feet above the treetops. The ground is alarmingly close and I begin to ponder any number of things, rational and otherwise: whether I'll accidentally shoot myself with the revolvers tucked into each pocket of my slacks when I land, how well they packed my chute back at headquarters, what Henri is doing right now, whether I've brought enough supplies to get me through my next menstrual cycle, whether Picon misses me, whether the expensive brassiere I'm wearing will last until the end of my mission, what to do about the blister forming on the side of my big toe. I go over the memorized list of railway junctions, bridges, underground cables, and fuel depots that must be destroyed, the addresses of safe houses along

with contacts and passwords, and the names of every Resistance leader known to London. There is far more hidden inside my brain than in my backpack or purse. Thus, the cyanide pill tucked inside the second button on the cuff of my left sleeve. I wonder, fleetingly, if I'll be forced to use that pill and what cyanide tastes like.

"T-minus sixty seconds," the dispatcher shouts toward the cockpit, and our pilot gives him the thumbs-up, then pulls a long red lever to his right. The aperture, ten feet from where I'm sitting, begins to lower with a whine and cold air rushes into the Liberator, pulling the breath from my lungs. I am thankful, once again, for my ridiculous, heavy coat.

When the hatch is fully open, the dispatcher turns to us and begins counting down. "Twenty seconds!"

I watch Hubert stand at the open hatch with the utmost calm. He is a soldier after all. Air jumps are nothing new to him. Whereas I've done only the one, back in London, and that was from a hot-air balloon.

"Ten seconds!"

Hubert squats, arms spread as though he's about to jump over a hedge. He tugs on the drop line once to make sure it's secured to his chute.

And then the countdown comes so quickly I can barely catch the words. "Five, four, three, two, one. *Jump!*"

Hubert is gone into the night and a second later the drop line goes taut. His chute has deployed, and I watch it inflate like a balloon beneath us. The dispatcher is staring at me in disbelief. "Why are you just sitting there? Go!"

"Wait!"

"No time! He's out. You gotta go!"

I raise one palm and shove it toward his face while I unbuckle myself with my other hand. He's muttering profanities as I unzip my purse and dig through the contents, looking for my tube of Lizzie Arden lipstick. For once, I'm not concerned about my forged travel documents or the one million French francs neatly stacked inside. Nor do I double-check that I still have the list of targets that must, no matter what, be distributed once the Allied forces land in France. I am frantic to find that slender tube of courage. Victory Red. The color of war and confidence and freedom. Finally, my pinkie brushes against the cool, familiar metal and I pluck it from my purse

along with the silver compact Buckmaster gave me as a parting gift. We've now passed the drop zone and the Liberator turns back around in a lazy, rumbling circle, but I meticulously apply the lipstick.

"What on earth are you doing?" the dispatcher shouts.

"Putting on my armor."

And suddenly I am calm. Collected. I feel like myself once again. I doubt our dispatcher will sign up to drop any more women into war zones, because he looks positively apoplectic as I stand, slide the lipstick and compact back into my purse, smack my lips, and then tuck the purse into my coveralls and belt my coat.

"Hey, Tex, has anyone ever refused to jump?" I ask.

Try as he might, he cannot hide his grin. "Just one guy. Sat down and buckled himself back in as soon as the hatch opened. Didn't say a word to us the entire flight home."

"Figures." I step toward the aperture, attach my rip cord to the drop line, and check it just as Hubert did. "Thanks for the ride."

The drop zone is in view once more. God knows where Hubert is down there, so I stand at the edge of the aperture and try to summon my courage. It is not normal to throw oneself from hurtling pieces of machinery. It goes against mankind's most basic instinct to survive. But I have trained for this—have known it was coming—for months. Besides, my husband is down there, somewhere, and I cannot get to him unless I leap. In the end that is where I find my fortitude, the thought of Henri, waiting for me. And now there is no time left for hesitation, so I give the dispatcher a nod, take a long breath through my nose, and remember what our instructor said: elbows in, legs together. Then I step out of the plane and into the dead of night.

This is nothing like jumping from a balloon. The Liberator is gone with one last angry roar, and I am greeted not by silence, as before, but by a cacophonous whoosh of air. The ground hurtles toward me and my rip cord catches on the drop line. There is a violent jerk followed by a rib-crushing tug, and I huff out a strangled breath as the straps of my parachute pack snap tight across my chest. My legs swing out in front of me like those of a dangling marionette. Then I surge upward for a split second as the oblong silver parachute flares out, slowing my descent. Only then am I engulfed by total silence, but I have no time to appreciate it because the treetops are less than fifty feet away. I plunge toward a thick copse of trees, their dark, bare, scraggly branches reaching toward me like the hands of gathered

skeletons. I pull, hard, on my right steering line and my legs swing away as the parachute turns, but I'm dropping too fast to avoid the trees altogether. The left corner of my chute catches on the farthest limb of a giant oak—as though it has plucked me from the sky with the tip of its bony finger—and I am yanked tighter into my harness. The sound I make is neither intelligible nor ladylike. And then I am swinging eight feet above the forest floor, trying to catch my breath, trying to find my bearings, as my lines untwist and I rotate in a lazy circle. North. South. East. West. Impossible to determine at this time of night. I force myself to wait, to dangle quietly beneath the tree. I can make this drop to the ground if I'm careful, so I yank the metal loop on my straps. Nothing. I try again. Gah! The release mechanism is locked. I have no more success on the next three tries, so I'm hanging there, trying to figure out how I'll reach the knife strapped to my garter belt—hidden beneath coat, jumpsuit, and slacks—when I see the red glow of a burning cigarette in the shadows directly beneath me. Once I catch my breath, I can smell the tangy scent of burning tobacco. I hear two heavy footsteps as someone moves forward.

"I hope all the trees in France bear such beautiful fruit this year," says a deep, male voice in French.

The weapons of warfare are different for women. Rarely do we have the luxury of bullets and bombs. Our tools are benign. Silk stockings and red lipstick. Laughter. Cunning. The ability to curse in foreign languages and make eye contact without trembling. But the most effective weapon by far, I believe, is charm.

So I laugh at him, then reply easily in his own language. "Enough of that French bullshit. Cut me down."

I am grateful beyond words to hear him return the laughter. "Hubert warned me about your tongue."

"Did he?"

"*Oui*. He said it was harsh enough to strip paint."

He's found Hubert then. Friend, not foe. Or so I hope. One can't ever really be sure these days. The Frenchman is roughly my height, very handsome, and quite thin. Though that could be due to the Occupation Diet and not a genetic disposition. Regardless, he shimmies up the tree in a pair of worn slacks and a collared shirt, then out onto the branch above me with a small knife clenched between his teeth. Nothing about the way he's dressed or how he moves gives

any hint of his identity. He could be a German sympathizer about to slit my throat, for all I know.

“Ready?” he asks, setting the knife against the rope attached to my release mechanism.

“Yes.”

Three quick saws and I drop to the ground with bent knees. My boots sink into the thick mulch that covers the forest floor, but I am unharmed. The Frenchman is still up in the tree, tugging at my chute, while I slip out of my harness, hat, coat, and coveralls. He finally pulls it free and lets it float to the ground. I am cold, I can see my breath curling into the air before me, but I refuse to shiver or put on my coat.

“Do you have a shovel?” I ask, staring up at him.

He looks at me as though I’ve asked for an engagement ring. “Why?”

“To bury the chute.” I hold up the harness I’ve just shed. “And this.”

He drops smoothly to the ground beside me, folds his knife, tucks it into his pocket, then takes his sweet time lighting another cigarette. “We aren’t going to bury it.”

“I was given strict instructions—”

“Fabric this soft? This sheer?” He gives me one of those looks his countrymen are famous for and caresses my parachute. “You’ll want it later. Trust me.”

I suppose I could try to yank the giant sheet of nylon from his hands, but it would only make noise and we haven’t exactly been quiet thus far. I watch him fold it instead. Only once it has been tucked under his arm does this strange little Frenchman finally take the time to study me. He looks me over, from red lips to shoulder-length black hair; from expensive coat—now folded and draped over one arm—to the Louis Vuitton purse dangling in the crook of an elbow. He moves on to the buttons that run down the front of my blouse, then to my slacks, his gaze finally lingering on my feet.

Then his gaze returns to my eyes. “How did you, of all people, come to be here?”

I offer him my very best smile. The one meant to disarm, because I am not yet fully convinced that Hubert isn’t somewhere on the other side of the hedgerow with his throat cut and this man part of the Milice.

“Now, *that*,” I say, “is a very long story.”