

THE SECRETS ACT

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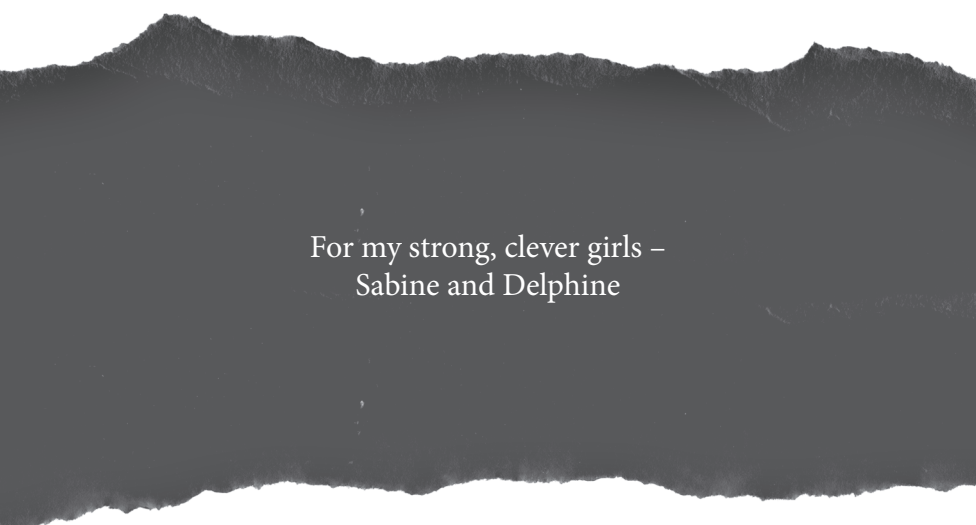


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For my strong, clever girls –
Sabine and Delphine



2 SEPTEMBER 1941

1

ELLEN

This was not at all what the letter had said would happen.

Ellen had been told to go to Bletchley in Buckinghamshire, which was not as easy as it sounded since all location signs and station names had been removed at the start of the war. Thanks to the kindness of a woman on the crowded third-class carriage, Ellen had managed to make it to the platform at Bletchley train station, where she stood waiting for someone from her new job to collect her. After the small crowd dispersed, Ellen paused in the rather large and cavernous building, silent except for the flap of a wayward pigeon, and tried to steady her nerves. When no one appeared to escort her, Ellen made her way outside, where the road was empty under the dimmed street lamps. Ellen could barely see the shape of her arm when she raised it to check her wristwatch. She had foolishly

hoped there would be a shiny, warm car waiting with special headlamps, hiding her from any German bombers flying overhead. Instead, there was nothing but the rustle of wind through trees and the disconcerting shriek of an owl.

Ellen was uneasy, exhausted, and out of sandwiches. She had never taken such a long journey alone – her mother had accompanied her to the interview in London – and although she was certain this was the right location, everything else about it seemed wrong. Adjusting her white reflective armband, she remembered the newspaper her mother had packed; it was as if her mother had known Ellen would need every tool possible from the pamphlet on blackout safety. She sighed, annoyed at both her mother's uncanny preparedness and the situation, and unfolded the reflective *Cardiff Times*, adding yet another layer of visibility for anyone looking for her. When one travels clear across the country to start a mysterious job, one expects to be collected at the train station.

The letter of employment had arrived at her home only weeks after her initial interview in London. Over breakfast the next morning, her parents agreed it was her duty to serve the King like her brother. Her mum, smiling wistfully, made a nostalgic comment about life back in Oxfordshire. She told Ellen to embrace the chance to get out of Wales for good. 'I never wanted my English children to end up with a common Welsh accent. This is the

chance to shake it,' she'd remarked. They'd moved to a village outside Cardiff when Ellen was quite young – Wales was home to her – and she never understood her mother's constant pining for England. It had been the source of arguments between her parents for as long as Ellen could remember but, to her knowledge, her father had no intention of ever leaving his job at the bank to move back.

Ellen had not been given a choice to return to the University of Wales in Cardiff for her second year. Her father made it clear that the interview and employment had resulted as much from his connections as her intelligence. Because of his efforts, there was to be no questioning of her opportunity with the Foreign Office. Ellen appreciated his endeavours – being proactive was very unlike him. Besides, Ellen loved her father's warm smiles and general selflessness (which was required around her strict, rigid mother) and wanted to do right by him. Plus, this was a chance to finally prove to her mother she could navigate the world on her own.

But now, staring into the empty street, Ellen already felt homesick for the silliest things – the heavy quilt on her bed, the smell of her father's evening cigarette, the tin of biscuits always available to squelch late-night hunger pangs. She tried not to think of her hollow stomach or the way her eyes kept filling. The sounds of the empty, dark town made her nervous – every snapped twig or distant

crack of a door slamming made her flinch. It felt like she was somewhere she should not be, which was a bad way to begin the next chapter of her new life.

The breeze kicked up, raising the hairs on the back of her neck. A faint noise in the distance caught her attention. Footsteps. Thuds getting louder, closer together. Frantically, Ellen looked for a place to hide, but felt daft as soon as she did. She had seen enough safety fliers to know not to walk around in the dark. How many people had died falling into holes or walking on to train tracks? Instead, Ellen stood firm with her suitcase close to her chest, ready to hurl it at whomever was heading in her direction.

Down the road, she spotted a very faint sliver of light, perhaps a torch rigged for use during the blackout. Ellen made herself very still, though her eyes scanned the road for an escape route, just in case.

‘Sorry, sorry, sorry!’ the girl’s voice shouted as she ran full bore down the lane. In spite of her speed, the girl came to a halt quickly and with more grace than Ellen had expected. She cleared her throat and said, ‘You are waiting for an escort, correct?’

‘I, uh, yes. Someone is to collect me for Ble—’

‘Shh!’ the girl interrupted, waving the torch like she was trying to fend off monsters. ‘There are ears all around. I know where you are heading. Follow me. You have your bags?’

Ellen nodded dumbly, then mumbled ‘yes’ when she realized the girl might not be able to see her nodding in the dark.

The girl strode purposefully down the narrow road. She did not even look back to see if Ellen was keeping up. Ellen marvelled at the girl, maybe as tall as her own shoulder, walking with such force and determination. She had short hair and wore a knee-length dress of some sort under a plain, boxy coat. In the light of day, Ellen would be able to complete a thorough analysis of the girl and their surroundings. At that point, she would have an almost completely accurate assessment of who the girl was, whether she was both short and young, and what her intentions were – a satisfying and calming process. Tonight, however, she was forced to rely on gut feelings. She didn’t like that. Feelings were squishy, emotional, unrepeatable things that never made sense, and for a girl with a head for maths there was nothing worse.

Finally, the girl turned, slowing her pace only slightly, and pointed the muted torch at Ellen. ‘Out with it,’ she instructed. ‘You want to ask something. I know you do. They always do.’

Ellen stopped, adjusted the grip on her suitcase and rubbed the ankle of one stockinged leg against the other. *They?* thought Ellen. *Who is they? Have I been lumped with ‘they’?* ‘You work at, er, for the Foreign Office?’

‘I do,’ the girl declared decisively.

‘What do you do?’ Ellen prodded. The more the girl talked, the more her accent became defined. She dropped some of her consonants, but not regularly, which could have meant she was from London. The careful manner with which she spoke made it sound like an accent she was trying to lose.

‘I deliver *things*, usually, not people. The person tasked with your retrieval was ill. I had to end my evening plans early to collect you instead,’ she said, turning down a narrower pathway. ‘My name is Pearl, by the way.’

‘Ellen,’ Ellen called after her. ‘Ellen Davies.’

‘Well, Ellen Davies, let me give you a piece of advice. Do not ask too many questions about what people do. It takes most new recruits a while to learn that, but it will be drilled into you soon enough. It is better if you approach your employment with caution.’

‘All right,’ Ellen stammered. Meeting new people was always hard for her and she relied on the data from what Mother often said was ‘endless questioning’ to feel more at ease. Ellen sorted through the questions in her mind, prioritizing them. *Only ask the essential questions, the burning ones that are also appropriate*, Ellen’s mother would say, *or people will get exhausted with you before they get a chance to know you. That is not how to make a friend.*

Pearl gestured with the torch as she walked, using it more like a prop than an instrument for visibility. She appeared familiar with the route, not needing the light to

identify the dips in the road.

Ellen cleared her throat. ‘Can I ask how long you have been at . . . there?’

‘I suppose. But that is your last question. I have been here nearly since the beginning. My mother started working here in 1938 and I left school and started shortly after. It seems like ages with how much things have changed around here.’

Ellen blinked a few times. Pearl had been there for more than two years? Perhaps she would appear older in daylight, but in the dark, she had the height and appearance of a thirteen-year-old. Ellen had been told in her interview that most employees had already finished university, and therefore was surprised Pearl had not even finished secondary school, and, she assumed, had not attended university. All Ellen’s tutors and parents’ friends had made such a fuss last year when she was the youngest at the University of Wales at sixteen, and she had always felt so strange about the attention. Praise about her exams and papers was different – the work deserved accolades. Being singled out for her age was another thing. Looking at Pearl’s purposeful stride, though, Ellen realized this girl didn’t have the same sort of problem with confidence, regardless of her age. Or if she did, she kept it well hidden.

‘Well, I shall not ask anything else,’ Ellen said. ‘I wouldn’t want to get anyone in trouble.’

‘Appreciated. Plus, with an accent like that – Welsh, correct? – it’s best to keep quiet for a while. People judge the silliest things here. I should know,’ Pearl added a bit mysteriously. ‘Besides, we should not dawdle. It is not smart to be out at night.’

Within only a few moments they were at a large gate. The guard waved Pearl through with a smile. He peppered Ellen with a dozen questions and she nervously produced her letter. The guard went inside his little brick house and they watched through the window as he flipped through a stack of papers for what seemed like ages. Finally, he emerged and welcomed Ellen to the Park. He told Pearl to deliver her to the mansion. Pearl took Ellen’s elbow and steered her quickly down the path.

‘Hold on,’ Ellen said as a massive brick building with dozens of arches and bay windows came into view. The one lamp post outside the mansion was dark, but she could still make out several chimneys and contrasting rooflines against the eerily bright grey sky. Pearl kept walking towards the building, but Ellen could not budge from her spot.

It was not easy, making that first step. All the answers, all her hopes, were inside that building. An escape from the constant bickering of her parents over the uncomfortable roast dinners that had become mostly potatoes since David left; a chance to find people like her. If, as they said in her interview, the Foreign Office was truly recruiting

the best of the best from the top universities, Ellen would find keen friendships with like-minded recruits. Also, this job would enable her to use her exceptional intelligence to directly help with the war effort. Of course, the interviewers did not say how exactly, but Ellen had ideas. She knew this was a big moment and in spite of the way her stomach sank when she saw that awful-looking building, Ellen wanted to take it all in. Someday, she told herself as she swallowed down her apprehension and excitement, she would remember this as the moment before she changed the world.

‘Hurry up!’ Pearl called. ‘The war is not going to win itself.’

Reluctantly, Ellen followed her through the ornate wooden double doors of Bletchley Park, which contained all the secrets of what her life was going to become.