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# 1

2018

A sallow moon shines through the bedroom window. Watching her. Sleep will be elusive tonight, Betty knows. Always the way when it's a full moon.

She really ought to close the curtains, but it would make no difference. The moon will still be there, whether she can see it or not.

A monthly reminder; as if she could ever forget.

From across the landing, she can hear Tali's rumbling snores. Her carer would have slept through the Blitz, Betty has no doubt. Lucky girl.

Sighing, she hoists herself up in the bed, reaching for her glasses on the bedside table. Yesterday's *Times* lies folded next to them, half read. She'll try the cryptic, see if that'll send her off. The moon's light is enough to see by, if she squints.

She rummages in the pockets of her bedjacket, but instead of the pencil she expects to find, she unearths a used tissue, a rusty hatpin, and a strange key whose lock she cannot recall. She peers at the key, an oddly shaped thing made of thick, twisted wire, turning it over in her palm. How had it come to be in her pocket?

From his basket at the foot of the bed, Tosca whines softly.

'What do you make of this, boy?' Betty asks her elderly Scottie dog. Lately, trying to recall things has been like stumbling around the house in the dark, hands fumbling for a light switch or a door handle. This key, for instance. Where had it come from? Its sudden appearance is a mystery.

She turns the metal object over and over, her brain grinding with the effort of remembering. An image flickers, and she thinks she has it, but no. She tries again, searching the shadowy recesses of her mind, tripping over memories long forgotten.

The dog emits a low growl.

'What is it, eh?' Betty pushes herself further up the pillows, and as she does so a vaguely familiar, smoke-hoarse voice comes clear to her across the years.

'A skeleton key'll open almost anything.'

There, in the far corner of the bedroom, all but invisible in the shadows, stands a figure. As it slowly approaches, Betty's fingers tighten around the key. She knuckles her glasses up her nose, trying to bring the man, for it is a man, into focus. He's nearly at the bed when recognition pierces the blackness of her memory; it is a man she knows only as 'Mr Smith the lock-picker'.

Betty's heart stutters. Is she hallucinating?

She hasn't seen her security instructor Mr Smith since 1944. Yet here he is, looking exactly the same as he did back then, wiry as a ferret, greasy-haired, wearing the same threadbare brown suit. There is a sudden waft of Woodbines, a smell that takes Betty

straight back to Wanborough Manor, Special Training School No. 5.

*Think of it always; speak of it never.*

He can't be real.

He is surely long dead.

'How did you get in here?' she demands. If this apparition is indeed Mr Smith, the question is redundant, she knows. A rumour had circulated at Wanborough that their instructor had been sprung from Wormwood Scrubs for his unrivalled knowledge of breaking and entering. Mr Smith could get in or out of anywhere, apparently. Whatever the truth, he certainly knew his locks.

The man grins, revealing blunt, tobacco-stained teeth. 'What sort of a welcome is that, young lady?'

Betty snorts at the thought of anyone, even a ghost, thinking her young. She lets the key drop on to the newspaper and takes off her glasses. But even after polishing the lenses on the frayed hem of her bed-jacket, it makes no difference. He's still there, practically close enough to touch, though the outline of his body is a little smudged now, as though he's someone's unfinished sketch.

A memory of Wanborough returns; watching Mr Smith demonstrate how easy it was to break into a sash window. 'Could use a jemmy,' he'd sniffed. 'Not that you'll have one. Could stick brown paper covered in treacle to the glass, then smash it with a hammer. Bloody faff, if you ask me. Nah, the quickest, easiest way is to slip your knife into the gap here, like so, and you're in.' With a flick of his wrist, he'd sliced the catch, and the window was open.

Betty clears her throat. 'Can I help you?' Perhaps he's come for his key? The thought is ludicrous, a small part of her conscious brain acknowledges. But she's been brought up to be respectful, even to the dead.

Especially to the dead.

'Just wondered if you'd heard,' the lock-picker smirks.

'Heard what?'

Mr Smith gestures at the newspaper on Betty's lap. 'Something on page twenty you'll want to see.'

She's loath to take her eyes off the man for fear that if she does so he'll vanish. He's a bit of company, after all. The nights can be so lonely, even with Tali in the room next door. But Mr Smith is gesturing at the *Times* impatiently.

Betty unfolds the newspaper, turns to page twenty. The obituaries. Of course.

With half an eye on her strange visitor, she begins to read the first entry.

*Mrs DORIS BONE née WATERS, 101, died peacefully following a short illness on 27 January at her home in Oxford.*

Betty's breath lodges in her throat, but she forces herself to read the whole obituary.

Her dearest, oldest friend was gone. It didn't matter that she hadn't seen Doris since the war. They'd written to each other every Christmas, and never forgot a birthday. She's kept those letters from Doris, every single one of them. In Doris's last communication, she'd been planning to visit Betty in Guildford.

*You and I can enjoy tea together at last and reminisce.*

The realisation that she will never see Doris again brings tears to Betty's eyes. She blinks them away as the lock-picker drifts back into the shadows. Tali's snores resonate through the wall. Betty rubs her temples, fighting the weariness that sweeps through her; a dark tide that grows stronger each day. Death is inevitable, claiming everyone eventually, she knows this. But still, she'll miss Doris. She'd been one of a rare breed; a fellow SOE survivor. There weren't many of them left.

And now her friend was gone.

*It gets us all in the end,* whispers Mr Smith.

Betty searches the shadows, but the man is no longer there.

The long, lonely hours of the night stretch before her.

\*

The next morning, settled in her armchair in the sitting room, Betty waits for Tali to return from the shops. She watches an extended family of sparrows squabbling on the bird-feeder, scattering seed on the scrubby lawn. She can hear them arguing even through the closed window. She'll have to ask Tali to put some more bird food out later. A fat pigeon descends from nowhere in a flurry of feathers, gate-crashing the avian picnic, sending the little brown birds darting into the bushes.

'You big bully,' Betty murmurs, her fingers tightening on the arms of her chair. She lifts her gaze

beyond the bird-feeder, staring down the narrow garden to the slice of river at the end, the water glinting in the low winter sun. When had she last swum in its cool, green depths? Or walked along its peaceful banks? She can't remember. A long, long time ago, when she was young and free.

Her knees and shoulders ache. Everything aches.

Old age is like a prison, Betty thinks. She's largely housebound now, only venturing out to visit the doctor, wholly reliant on Tali for her shopping and the upkeep of this house. These days, she is no more able to control the course of her life than a piece of flotsam can expect to steer the river.

She sniffs.

Enough of this.

She will ask Tali to take her to Doris's funeral, so she can pay her respects to her friend, if it's the last thing she does.

At her feet, Tosca wakes and emits a wheezy bark, hauling himself up on his stumpy legs. A moment later, the front door slams.

*'Je suis de retour, Madame Betty!'*

Betty peers at her watch, dangling loose from her bony wrist. Its glass face is cracked, yet it still keeps perfect time, even after all these years. It's now twenty past eleven. Tali had left for the supermarket before nine; what had taken the girl so long?

She can hear her carer crashing about in the hall, no doubt divesting herself of garments. To Betty's bemusement, Tali insists on dressing for Arctic conditions regardless of the weather.

Tosca waddles out to the hallway, tail wagging.

*'J'arrive, Madame Betty!* There comes the clunk of a heavy bag dropping on the hall tiles, followed by a breathless Creole expletive.

Closing her eyes in concentration, Betty follows her carer's movements by sound, as Tali blunders into the kitchen, mumbling to the dog as she goes. The tap gurgles as the kettle is filled, the hinges of the larder door squeal and then, a moment later, comes the unmistakable pebbly rattle of too much dog kibble being poured into Tosca's bowl. Listening carefully, Betty pictures Tali moving about her little kitchen, and the image cheers her. When at last the young woman appears in the sitting room doorway, her cheeks are glowing, and her unruly dark curls have come free of their clips and are falling in her eyes.

*'You will never believe it, Madame Betty,'* Tali exhales, hands on her ample hips. *'No flour or eggs in Aldi! I had to walk all the way to Sainsbury's.'* She tucks a clump of hair behind an ear and plonks herself down on the settee. If anyone had asked Betty to describe her live-in carer, she would have called her *'wide-beamed'; 'well-built'; 'colourful'*. Today, Tali is wearing some mismatched outfit of skirt, sweater and tights, in a glaring clash of reds and oranges, with a scarf of canary-yellow wrapped around her neck. The whole ensemble is too vibrant, in Betty's opinion, for a woman the wrong side of thirty.

*'Never mind,'* Betty says. *'I have something to show you.'* She passes Tali the newspaper, folded open at Doris's obituary.

Tali reads the paragraph slowly. *'Interesting lady,'* she says, looking up. *'You knew her, Madame Betty?'*



Betty dips her head, swallows a lump in her throat. Doris would not have wanted tears. 'The funeral is on Friday.' She absently strokes the skeleton key in her lap. The scent of Woodbines lingers in her nostrils, and she wonders if her carer can smell it too. 'I want to go.'

'OK.' Tali smiles, her eyes flicking to Betty's lap. 'What is that you have?'

After a moment's hesitation, Betty hands Tali the key, watching her carer's face as she studies its odd shape.

'What is this, Madame Betty?'

'A skeleton key.' There, she's told the truth.

Tali frowns. 'What is a skeleton key?'

'You must have them in Mauritius. They open any lock.'

'Thieves and robbers use them?'

'Not exclusively.' Why did everyone always assume the worst?

'You were a thief or robber once, Madame Betty?' Tali grins.

Betty sighs inwardly. *If only you knew, child.*

Tali heaves herself to her feet. 'Do you want lunch now?'

'*Je n'ai pas faim, Natalia.*'

'Not yet, maybe. But when you smell my *bouyon brede* ...'

Betty's favourite.

'I'm not hungry.' This was true, but it's not only Doris's death that has robbed Betty of her meagre appetite.

'The soup will take a little time, anyway,' Tali says, making her way to the door. 'When you smell it, you'll be hungry then.'

With Tali gone, the room instantly reverts to monochrome once more. Betty's gaze drifts to the cluttered sideboard; amongst the detritus of her life sit two framed black-and-white photographs. One is of herself and Fred, taken on the River Wey in 1967. They're sitting in Fred's tiny rowing boat, the *Jenny Wren*, which he'd built himself out of scrap wood.

Occasionally, if she stares at this photo for long enough, she can breathe the scent of the river that day, feel the brief caress of sun on her face. She'd been happy, out in that little boat with Fred.

The other photograph, the one her eye keeps snagging on lately, is of her son, Leo, plump and scowling from the depths of a Silver Cross pram. He'd been a fractious, colicky baby. They'd tried their best, she and Fred, but Leo had not been an easy child to love.

She thinks of the airmail that arrived from Australia a few days ago.

*Mother, I'm coming home.*

Betty closes her eyes. When she opens them again, her carer is calling from the kitchen.

'Lunch is ready!' A moment later, Tali appears in the doorway carrying a steaming bowl of soup on a tray. She sets it down carefully on Betty's lap, and the aroma of herbs and chicken is so rich, Betty's stomach growls.

'Thank you, dear.' She smiles.

'My Nani's recipe,' Tali says, modestly. 'Without too much spice.'

Tali brings her own soup through from the kitchen, then sits on the settee opposite Betty, balancing her

bowl on her knees. Tosca wanders back into the room, a hopeful look in his eye.

For a while, there is only the tink of metal on china, as both women scoop up broth and blow on their spoons.

'I have something to tell you,' Betty says at last, swallowing a final mouthful of dumpling. 'But don't fly off the handle.'

Tali's forehead furrows as she stares at Betty's spoon. 'What fly on your handle ...?'

'I mean, you mustn't be angry that I haven't told you before now.'

'Told me what?' Tali's shining brown eyes remind Betty of a kitten Fred once bought for Leo's birthday. 'A companion for the boy.' Being an only child could be lonely. Betty had known that well enough herself.

Betty rubs her brow. 'Would you fetch my big handbag, Natalia dear? It's in my wardrobe.'

Minutes later, Tali returns from Betty's bedroom, hefting a leather bag in her arms. 'What have you got in here, Madame Betty? The kitchen cupboard?'

'Sink,' Betty corrects, as Tali sets the bag down gently on her lap. For years, Betty has only used this handbag to hide things in. The burgundy leather is cracked and dusty and her arthritic fingers fumble for a moment with the stiff clasp, but at last she manages to prise it open. She remembers shoving the letter in the bag; out of sight, out of mind.

Delving deep, Betty's fingers touch something hard and she draws out a small dagger, tucked in its worn leather sheath.

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'You have *un couteau* in your bag?'

Betty glances up, surprised by her carer's shocked, accusatory tone.

*A knife should always be carried ... Betty hears the voice of the instructor at Arisaig as clearly as though he stands before her. A knife is capable of being used either as a utility or offensive weapon.*

'You never know when you might need a sharp blade,' Betty mutters, tucking the knife back in the bag. She pulls out a small pocket torch next.

Followed by a compass on a string.

Then a length of silk cord, wrapped in a loose ball. *This, the officer intones in Betty's head, may be used for any purpose, from tying a man up to preparing a booby trap.*

Half a packet of cough lozenges next, stuck with old fluff from the bottom of the bag.

And lastly a box of matches. *Always carry a full box, because a half-empty one rattles and might give your location away.*

'Are you smoking, Madame Betty?' Tali's voice has taken on a reproachful tone.

'What if I am?' Betty snaps. A cigarette was hardly going to kill her now.

*Where is that damn letter?*

She can feel Tali's eyes on her, as she roots one last time in the bag and finally draws out the airmail. 'This came the other day.'

It doesn't take long for Tali to read the letter. She looks up, her face unusually pale. 'Your son, he is coming home?'

Betty gives a terse nod.

Tali bends her head to the short letter again. 'He writes here—'

'Pay no attention to that,' Betty interrupts. 'I have no intention of going anywhere. And neither are you.'

For a time there is silence, both women deep in their own thoughts. At last, Tali passes the airmail back and rises. 'I will wash up, now.'

Alone, Betty contemplates the return of her son, and a feeling of helplessness sweeps through her. She hasn't always been weak and decrepit, she reminds herself. There was a time – a long time ago, granted – when she was strong. When she was brave.

Could she be brave again?

But that was almost seventy-five years ago, in a world long gone.

The threat she faces now is a very different beast.

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## 2

February 1944

Elisabeth peered through a slit in the blacked-out window, as her train wheezed into Waterloo Station half an hour late. The platform seethed with military personnel, harried commuters, and weary Londoners clutching their scant belongings. Tightening the belt on the black peplum jacket she'd borrowed from her mother, Elisabeth stepped down from the train and was swept towards the exit in a stream of bodies.

Incomprehensible tannoy announcements echoed in her ears as she negotiated a path through the crowded main concourse, heading towards what she hoped was the right exit. A poster on a wall caught her eye: *Is Your Journey Really Necessary?* The question burned in her mind as she hurried out into the freezing drizzle in search of a bus stop.

The first bus Elisabeth attempted to board was rammed full, but the next offered limited standing room. She forced her way down the packed aisle, breathing shallowly, the air thick with the stench of grime and soot and unwashed bodies. Clutching a hanging strap, she braced her legs as the bus lurched

out on to the main road. The steamed-up windows ran with condensation, blurring Elisabeth's view of her journey as the bus trundled on, swaying round corners. Her stomach swayed with it.

For the first time since leaving home, she wondered if she was doing the right thing. It was a risk coming into London, and all on the basis of a single letter, even if that letter was from the War Office. She fingered the envelope in her coat pocket.

*Dear Miss Ridley,*

*I would be obliged if you could attend a meeting with me at the Hotel Victoria, Northumberland Avenue, London, on 20 February, to discuss the recent photographs you kindly submitted to the Admiralty. I apologise for the short notice. Please come alone, and hotel reception will direct you.*

*Yours sincerely,  
Captain Porter*

Elisabeth had been both disconcerted and intrigued by the lack of detail in the letter, but her mother, Florence, was suspicious when she'd shown it to her at breakfast yesterday.

'What does this Monsieur Porter want with you?' Florence had demanded.

'*Je ne sais pas,*' Elisabeth had answered. 'But I can't very well ignore it, Maman. It's from the government.'

As the bus rumbled over Westminster Bridge and on towards Northumberland Avenue, Elisabeth stared

through a patch of window that a passenger had wiped clear. Bomb-damaged buildings slid past beyond the glass, and she glimpsed shattered roofs and collapsed walls, broken furniture piled in the streets like matchwood. The bus lurched on, past a short parade of sandbagged shopfronts. Dazed Londoners loitered on the wreckage-strewn pavement, waiting to be fed at a Salvation Army mobile canteen.

Elisabeth shuddered at the unfurling scene of horror. Her initial sense of excitement at leaving Guildford had long since dissipated, replaced now by a feeling of sick dread. What on earth had possessed her to come here?

Before the war, she'd loved visiting London, only an hour from home on the train. She and her mother had sometimes gone window-shopping along Oxford Street, and once Mr Farr, her boss at the solicitors', had organised a Christmas staff outing to see a show at the Apollo Victoria. Elisabeth had never forgotten her first experience of the art-deco theatre, the huge domed ceiling and gleaming organ pipes reaching to the roof, the stage lights morphing as if by magic from emerald green to mauve to burnished gold. That night, she'd been transported to a fantastical underwater world, a wondrous mermaid's grotto, and the memory had stayed with her ever since.

But on this freezing grey February morning, she struggled to reconcile her memories of the city with the dispiriting, frightening reality unfurling beyond the streaming window.

By the time the bus turned on to Northumberland Avenue, she'd convinced herself she'd made a grave



mistake. She had no more scenic photographs of France, if that was what this Captain Porter – whoever he was – wanted. Well, there was one other photograph, but she wasn't going to relinquish that one as it was the only picture she had of her parents together, enjoying their honeymoon on a beach in Normandy.

The bus was slowing before a looming brownstone building, sandbags piled around its entrance.

'Hotel Victoria!' the conductress yelled.

The bus shuddered to a stop, and Elisabeth pushed her way down the steps and out on to the rain-slick pavement. Straightening the hem of her tweed skirt, she took a deep breath, gazing up at the soot-streaked edifice before her. As she'd made it this far, she may as well go in.

Massive glass and mahogany revolving doors led to an ornate, grey-and-ochre marble foyer beyond, echoing with voices. Elisabeth paused inside the entrance, observing the knot of people gathered at the reception desk. Most wore the various uniforms of service personnel. She watched a couple of porters pushing trolleys teetering with suitcases and boxes across the foyer, Messenger Service boys flitting amongst them like minnows.

She drew in another steady breath, counselling herself sternly. It had taken her a damn long time to get here, and no doubt the journey back home would take even longer, so she may as well find out what this Captain Porter wanted. And the sooner she saw him, the sooner she could go, as she really didn't want to be caught out if an air-raid siren went off. The prospect of taking shelter in the London Underground

turned her guts to water. She'd heard horror stories of what went on down there.

She waited her turn at the reception desk, handing her letter to a clerk for inspection. 'Room 238 is on the fifth floor,' the woman informed her. 'The lift's broken.'

The fifth floor, when she reached it, was bustling with more military personnel, but no one paid her any heed as she hurried along a carpeted corridor. Arriving at room 238, she hesitated again.

*Qui ne risque rien, n'a rien.* Her mother's favourite saying came into Elisabeth's head. *Nothing ventured, nothing gained.*

Elisabeth rolled her tense shoulders, smoothed her damp hair, and knocked on the door.

A man's voice issued from beyond. 'Come in!'

Elisabeth stepped into a small, plain room, a desk, two chairs and a filing cabinet the only furnishings. A sandy-haired man in perhaps his forties was reading a document at the desk, and he glanced up as Elisabeth entered.

'Can I help you?'

'Captain Porter? I'm Elisabeth Ridley. You wrote to me.'

'Ah, yes!' The man rose and came around the desk. 'You got here all right, then.' He gave her hand a brief shake. 'Thank you for taking the trouble.' He blinked, extracted a folded handkerchief from his trouser pocket, and violently sneezed into it. 'Apologies,' he sniffed. 'I can't seem to shift this cold.'

Elisabeth waited politely while the man blew his nose. The room smelled of stale tobacco, and she eyed

the narrow, closed window, the glass so grimed with soot and pigeon dirt it was practically blacked out.

'Please, take a seat.' Captain Porter gestured to the vacant chair, and Elisabeth perched on the edge of it, pocketing the now crumpled letter. Her fingers were clammy and she surreptitiously wiped them on her skirt as she smoothed it over her knees.

'Never a spare pen when you need one in this place,' Captain Porter mumbled, rooting in a desk drawer. With his reddened nose and watery eyes, he looked unwell to Elisabeth. She hoped his cold wasn't catching. While the officer hunted in the drawer, Elisabeth took the opportunity to scan the room.

Something wasn't quite right about the place, but the bare walls yielded no information, and when she turned her attention back to Captain Porter she found, to her alarm, that he was staring at her. For the space of one breath, two, three, they faced each other across the desk. It took an effort of will on Elisabeth's part, but she held his pale blue gaze.

She was beginning to seriously consider making her excuses and leaving, when he cleared his throat.

'This interview must seem rather odd to you,' he said, twisting his mouth in what Elisabeth presumed was an attempt at a smile. She smiled hesitantly back. She hadn't realised this was an interview.

'It's not ideal, of course,' Captain Porter said, fumbling again in the desk drawer. 'But needs must.' After a brief search, he brought out a pipe and a pouch of tobacco, placing them next to an overflowing ashtray on the desk. His hand trembled slightly, Elisabeth noticed.

'Now, first things first,' Captain Porter sighed. 'You are Elisabeth Ridley?'

'Yes,' she answered.

'Elisabeth spelled with an "s"?''

She nodded.

While Captain Porter wrote something on a pad of paper, Elisabeth studied the man's face; the crescents of grey beneath his eyes told of heavy responsibilities or lack of sleep.

He looked up suddenly and caught her eye, and Elisabeth felt herself redden.

'Your parents,' the captain said, switching to French. 'Tell me about them.' He spoke with only the barest of English accents.

Elisabeth tried to gather her thoughts. Was he testing her knowledge of French? If so, why not just ask her if she spoke the language?

*And why on earth did he want to know about her parents?*

She hesitated, yet there was something in the man's eyes, his moist gaze steady and direct, that seemed sincere.

Captain Porter reached for the pipe, packed the bowl with tobacco and lit it, leaning back in his chair.

'Your parents?'

'They met in France in 1916,' Elisabeth began slowly. Her French came naturally, but she chose her words with care.

'They are both French?' Captain Porter pressed.

'My mother is, but my father was English.' Elisabeth's heart clenched at the use of the past tense.

'Go on, please.'

'Papa was injured fighting in the last war. He met my mother while he was recuperating in a hospital in Paris where Maman was a nurse.' Elisabeth remembered fondly her father's tale of falling in love with Florence; his very own Florence Nightingale, he used to joke.

*'I knew immediately that I'd found the woman I wanted to spend the rest of my life with, Lisbeth.'*

Captain Porter sneezed again. He blew his nose, flapping his free hand at Elisabeth to go on. She wished he would open the window.

'They married as soon as Papa was well enough,' she went on. 'They lived with Maman's parents and had me in 1918.'

'Your father worked in France after the war?'

'He drove omnibuses.'

'Please, go on.'

Elisabeth gave a brief account of her early years growing up in the countryside outside Paris. After Elisabeth's maternal grandparents died, Papa had moved the family to Guildford to live with his elderly, infirm mother. Every summer, they would return to the Continent to visit their few remaining French relatives, and to Elisabeth it always felt like coming home.

'And where are your parents now?' Captain Porter asked.

'Papa volunteered as an air-raid warden. He was too old to be called up this time.' By the way he was looking at her, Elisabeth had the uneasy feeling that the captain already knew all this.

'He ... he was killed in an air raid two years ago.' Her eyes misted and she clenched her jaw. The night

of his sudden, violent death was forever seared on her memory, his absence a wound in her chest that had never fully healed.

'My condolences,' Captain Porter murmured, squinting at her through a haze of smoke. 'Your mother? She's alive?' He spoke French confidently, Elisabeth noted. But he wasn't French-born, she felt sure.

'*Oui.*' Maman was definitely alive and well. Elisabeth tried to picture what her mother was doing at this very moment. Florence Ridley had left nursing and was now a leading member of the Women's Voluntary Service (Women of Various Sizes, as Elisabeth thought of them, having read it somewhere once and finding it suited her mother's mixed bag of colleagues).

Since Papa's death, Maman had been busier than ever, filling her days volunteering in all manner of ways. Every day she rose at dawn, barely pausing for breakfast before she was out collecting books and clothing and other useful things from scrap heaps or jumble sales across Guildford, and redistributing them to church refuges and the army barracks at Stoughton. Once or twice a week she attended 'jobbing classes' at the local village hall to learn how to unblock a drain or change a fuse or put up a shelf, all tasks that Elisabeth's father had once done. At home in the evenings she would knit for orphans, or darn socks, or write letters. Sometimes, she would persuade Elisabeth to join her at a local WVS talk on family health or women's rights.

Once, Elisabeth had asked her mother if she intended at any point to slow down, to put herself first for a change, rather than always thinking of other people.

'*Jamais,*' Florence had answered. 'What did your father used to say? A woman's work is never done.'

'And what about you, Miss Ridley?' Captain Porter asked, breaking into Elisabeth's thoughts. 'Do you work?'

'*Oui,*' she answered. 'I'm a secretary, and I volunteer with the WVS at the weekends.'

She thought fleetingly of her colleagues at Lawson and Farr Solicitors in Guildford. Her best friend Josie and the other girls in the office all belonged to the Women's Voluntary Service too, which enabled them to keep their jobs.

The officer puffed smoke and fixed her with a look as if to say *I know all this*.

There came a knock at the door, and a young woman poked her head into the room. 'Tea, sir?'

'Ah, yes, tea would be superb,' Captain Porter smiled. 'And perhaps you could rustle up some of those garibaldi biscuits?'

'I'll see what I can find, sir.'

Elisabeth's throat was parched, and when the tea materialised a few minutes later, she gulped down a cup, scalding her tongue. There were no garibaldi biscuits, apparently, but the girl had managed to get hold of half a tin of digestives. Elisabeth's stomach rumbled as she took one.

'You sent some photographs to the Admiralty,' Captain Porter said, biting a biscuit in half and scattering crumbs down his shirt front. 'Tell me about that.'

'There's not much to tell,' Elisabeth replied. 'I saw an advert in the local paper asking for pictures of the French coastline, and I knew Maman had some

photographs of me as a little girl playing on the beach at Deauville, so I sent a few in.'

She hadn't donated all the photographs of course, suspecting she wasn't going to get them back again.

'I've told you all I know,' she said, reverting to English. 'Now please would you explain why I've been asked to come here?'

'Well may you ask that,' Captain Porter continued in French.

'Your letter was very vague,' Elisabeth pressed, still speaking English, not caring that she sounded blunt.

'If you'll allow me to explain, Miss Ridley,' Captain Porter replied. He held her eye a moment and appeared to decide something. 'You've been identified by Special Operations Executive as potentially helpful to the war effort.'

Elisabeth's spine stiffened. 'I'm sorry, I don't understand.'

'How do you feel about the war, Miss Ridley? If you could wave a magic wand, would you eradicate all Nazis from the face of the earth?'

*What a ridiculous thing to ask.*

'Well, of course the Nazis deserve annihilation,' she answered. 'But it's not as easy as that, is it?'

'Interesting,' Captain Porter murmured, scribbling on the notepad. His next question was even odder. 'Can you ride a bicycle?'

Elisabeth stared at him, as a childhood memory surfaced. An older cousin in France had once tried to teach her to ride, but she'd never really got the hang of it.



'Yes,' she lied.

'Would you be willing to leave the country, for a time?'

Elisabeth considered the question. As a child, she'd left England every summer to visit family in France. But her mother had always been with her. She'd miss Maman if they were parted for any length of time. But Florence was barely at home these days, so taken up was she with war work, and she had many friends; she was not someone who complained of loneliness.

'It would depend where,' Elisabeth answered. 'And for how long.'

The captain gave a wry smile, as though he had expected this response, and offered her the tin of biscuits. She accepted another digestive, wishing she hadn't drunk all her tea so fast.

'Do you have any personal commitments, Miss Ridley?'

Elisabeth was glad she had a mouthful of biscuit, taking her time to think of a polite answer as she swallowed. 'If you mean, Captain, do I have a boyfriend, then no, I do not.' She held his eye, and Captain Porter had the grace to drop his gaze, shuffling his papers unconvincingly.

'Would you be prepared to undertake dangerous work?' he asked next, still speaking French.

'What sort of dangerous work?'

'For reasons of security, I can't tell you precise details, I'm afraid.' Captain Porter relit his pipe. 'All I can say is, if you agree to work for us at SOE, you'll be putting yourself in harm's way.'

Captain Porter fell silent. From beyond the door came the faint beat of footsteps hurrying along the corridor.

Elisabeth's mind raced with them. This meeting wasn't what she had expected at all.

'We need honest, single-minded women, with nerves of steel, to undertake missions in France,' Captain Porter forged on. 'We're looking for intelligent people who will obey instructions. People who are confident, and not risk-averse, but neither are they reckless. Women, like yourself, who would carry on with their mission, however hopeless the situation might seem.'

Elisabeth took a sudden breath. 'Captain Porter, are you recruiting me as a spy?'

'In some ways, what we're asking people to do is very similar to spying,' Captain Porter said. 'Our agents undergo special training before being sent into enemy-occupied territory to undertake particular tasks. This section is concerned with France, where we're trying to make things as unpleasant and difficult for the Nazis as we can.' He paused, letting his words sink in. 'Sabotage is our main concern.'

He gave a phlegmy cough. 'Naturally, the Germans don't appreciate our efforts to blow up their troop trains and such like,' he went on. 'They react violently and brutally. Hence the need to recruit the right people to undertake this sort of thing.'

'And you think I might be one of these people?'

'Well, the first qualification we look for in a potential agent is their ability to pass as a native of France. You speak fluent French, you're small and dark-haired, and all told you have the look of a Frenchwoman.'

*That's because I'm half-French,* Elisabeth wanted to snap.

'You have a family connection to France,' Captain Porter continued. 'And although I haven't questioned you on this matter, I'd wager you're sympathetic to the French Resistance and their fight for freedom.'

Elisabeth made no reply, but the officer seemed not to be expecting one. 'Finally,' he said, 'a potential agent should possess courage and initiative, which you have shown this morning by coming here alone.'

Elisabeth's mind whirred, trying to make sense of what the man was saying. *Was* he recruiting her to be some sort of spy? All she knew of spies came from novels; *Kim* by Rudyard Kipling was one of her favourites, along with Buchan's *The Thirty-Nine Steps*.

Did this man really think she was special-agent material? But she was only a typist, for goodness' sake. Since Papa's death, she'd tried to stay as safe as possible with her mother, rarely venturing further than town, minding her own business. But what, she thought to herself now, if everyone had that attitude? Her father was dead, her mother busy with her own affairs. She had no siblings, only a handful of French cousins whom she hadn't heard from since the start of the war. There was nobody in her family who was capable of fighting for the freedom of France. Perhaps the time had finally come to do her duty, for the sake of her family across the Channel, and to avenge her poor Papa's death.

She did want to help, she realised.

'If you accept, you'll be sent for training,' Captain Porter said, 'and assessed as to your suitability for

the kind of work we have in mind. If you're deemed unsuitable, you'll be debriefed and simply return to your normal work.'

Elisabeth pictured her current existence: the cramped, fourth-floor solicitors' office, and her infernal typewriter under its leatherette cover. Its clattering keys were the bane of her life.

'There are risks, naturally,' Captain Porter continued. 'As there always are in times of war. But in this case, once an agent is in France, the risks for them will be considerably higher.' He cleared his throat. 'An agent's chances of survival may be as low as fifty per cent.'

Elisabeth suppressed a shiver.

'You don't have to give me an answer immediately,' Captain Porter said. 'But I must warn you, for reasons of security you're forbidden from discussing this interview with anyone, even your mother.'

That would be difficult, Elisabeth thought. Though she rarely saw her mother for more than half an hour at dinner these days, and the conversation always revolved around the latest WWS initiative, Florence would still want to know how her daughter's visit to London had gone. She'd just have to invent a story on the journey home, something that would convince her mother that nothing of importance had occurred. She would have to lie.

Elisabeth looked at the officer. *Think*. What questions should she be asking him that she wasn't?

'You will receive a letter soon,' Captain Porter said, rising from his chair and extending a hand. 'This will inform you of the next stage. If you choose to accept,

you must tell your family and friends you have taken a job working as an interpreter for the War Office.'

Elisabeth rose on numb legs, and shook the captain's proffered hand. She felt slightly sick. There came a knock on the door. It was the young woman who had brought the tea and biscuits.

'Ah, Mavis, excellent. Could you please see Miss Ridley out?'

Elisabeth followed Mavis back down the stairs and across the foyer, and found herself standing on the damp, bustling pavement again, the real world crashing back in a blur of noise and motion.

The last hour had been the oddest of her life, Elisabeth thought, as she stumbled to the bus stop. Really quite peculiar. She longed to tell someone about her strange 'interview'; she could just imagine Josie in the office pouncing on the details, desperate to know more. But Captain Porter had been quite firm; she must keep this meeting a secret.

Two hours later, back at her desk at Lawson and Farr, she pretended to be suffering from a headache. In truth, her head did feel stuffed full of wet wool. To her relief, Josie and the other girls left her alone for the most part, and for what remained of the afternoon she trudged her way through a stack of typing, working like an automaton, her mind still in that stuffy little room with Captain Porter.

The longer she thought about it, the more she realised he was offering her a way out of this tedious, dead-end job. As for the question of danger, well, that was surely an exaggeration on Captain Porter's part?

Excitement rippled in her belly, a sensation she hadn't felt in a very long time.

\*

Three days later, she received a second letter from the War Office, inviting her to attend a translating course at a place called Wanborough Manor, near Guildford. Elisabeth read the letter out to her mother, all but the final line. Florence was suitably convinced that her daughter was doing something official for the war effort, and was happy for her to go.

'Haven't I always told you, to speak more than one language is a blessing,' Florence said. 'Only promise me: *sois prudente*.'

The night before she was due to leave for Wanborough, Elisabeth packed a small suitcase, then read the letter through once more, checking she hadn't missed any instructions. She would be collected by car from the back entrance of Guildford train station at noon. The driver would ask for her name. She was to answer 'Elise'.

But it was the final line that made her blood tingle.  
*Tell no one.*

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### 3

March 1944

'You're the third one I've ferried to Wanborough this week,' the driver told Elisabeth, as she travelled down the Hog's Back the following day.

'Am I?' Elisabeth stared through the Austin's window at the bare trees and rolling hills of the North Downs Way. She'd only been along this road a couple of times before, by bus. She felt like royalty in the back of this car.

'Strange goings-on there,' the driver said, glancing at her in his rear-view mirror. 'I reckon it's a secret military base. You one of them WAAFs, are you?'

'Just a secretary,' Elisabeth replied, with an innocent smile. It wasn't a lie.

On the short journey through Wanborough village, Elisabeth tried and failed to reconcile Captain Porter's talk of dangerous missions with this benign, picturesque little place.

'Nearly there, miss.' The driver slowed as they neared a large timbered tithe barn, beyond which sat a neat Saxon church.

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'Welcome to Wanborough Manor,' the driver announced, turning into a carriage drive and pulling up before a red-brick mansion.

As the driver unloaded Elisabeth's case from the boot, she gazed up at the manor's grand frontage, trying not to feel intimidated by the gabled chimneys and shining diamond-pane windows bearded with thick ivy. It was like something out of an Agatha Christie novel. She could hear faint shouting coming from somewhere in the grounds behind the house.

'Best of luck, miss,' the driver said, with the hint of a wink.

Belly churning with nerves, Elisabeth climbed the stone steps to the mansion's front door. What was she doing here? Her mother and Mr Farr had both accepted her lie that she was on a fortnight-long translating course. Only Josie had questioned her story. Her friend had an uncanny knack of sniffing out fibs.

'But how did the government even know you can speak French?' Josie had asked, on Elisabeth's last day in the office.

'Do you remember that advert I showed you, ages ago?' Elisabeth had replied. 'The one in the *Surrey Ad* asking for photographs of France to be sent to the Admiralty?'

'You sent some, didn't you?'

'Yes, and then they wrote back to me,' Elisabeth explained. 'They said they needed French translators, and I thought, well, I could do my bit for the war ...'

Josie had frowned, but before she could ask more questions, Mr Farr had sent her off to make coffee.

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How she wished Josie was with her now.

She rang the bell pull, and a moment later the door was answered by a soldier in General Service uniform. Elisabeth gave her false name, Elise, as directed in the letter, and the soldier admitted her into the oak-panelled hallway.

The place smelled like her old school: leather and dust and furniture polish. Directly facing her was an impressive, curving dark wood staircase. Men in khaki uniform were bustling up and down it, and Elisabeth wondered if the driver had been right, that this place was indeed some dubious, underground military organisation.

'Please follow me, miss.' The soldier led the way up the stairs and along a luxuriously carpeted corridor, rapping on a door at the far end.

A woman's muffled voice called, 'Come in.'

The soldier turned to leave. 'I'll tell Officer Stewart you've arrived, miss.'

'Thank you.' Elisabeth pushed open the door, revealing a bright, sun-warmed room containing two single beds. The walls were papered in a pretty, pale blue flower pattern that put her in mind of a nursery or a child's bedroom. A young woman was sitting cross-legged on the bed nearest the window.

'Oh hello,' the woman said, rising and crossing the room. She was perhaps a year or two older than Elisabeth, slim-figured, with styled, dark-blond hair framing a face Elisabeth instantly judged as photogenic.

'I'm so pleased you're here,' the woman said. 'I thought I was the only one. The only girl, I mean. There's plenty of army chaps everywhere, and I've seen

a few FANYs dashing about, but I was getting really worried that I was going to be all on my own ...' She smiled, revealing teeth like pearls. 'I'm Doris Waters, by the way.' She stuck out her hand. 'Though we aren't allowed to use our real names, apparently. I'm Dominique while I'm here.' She pulled an exaggerated face of disgust, and Elisabeth couldn't help but laugh.

'It's a bloody awful name, isn't it?' Doris sighed. 'I'll never remember to answer to it, I'm sure. What's your name?'

'My real name?' Elisabeth wavered for a second, but Doris's forthright gaze was too hard to resist. 'Elisabeth Ridley. But I'm Elise here.'

'So neat and elegant.' Doris gave Elisabeth an appraising look. 'Suits you.'

Elisabeth felt her cheeks warm.

'That's your bed, over there,' Doris indicated. 'I hope you don't mind, but I chose the one by the window. I like a smoke.' She grinned, and a dimple appeared in her left cheek.

Elisabeth shoved her suitcase under the bed, then gave the mattress an experimental press. It felt softer than her bed at home. She looked around the room. Against one wall stood a large walnut wardrobe and matching chest of drawers. The remaining furniture comprised a washstand complete with jug and ewer, and a single wooden chair, currently half hidden beneath Doris's open suitcase.

Elisabeth crossed to the window and looked out over the grounds at the rear of the mansion. Manicured lawns stretched down to a kitchen garden, with regimented rows of vegetables and a shed tucked behind

a hedge. Behind this were farm buildings and a field of cows, a meadow beyond dotted with grey military tents, and what looked like a troop of soldiers marching in a circle. Further fields and woodland stretched away into the distance.

She turned back to Doris. 'What exactly is this place?'

Doris extracted a cigarette from a pack of Player's. 'A training school, of sorts.' She waved the packet at Elisabeth, who shook her head.

'Did the War Office write to you?' Elisabeth asked. Had Captain Porter interviewed this woman too?

'We shouldn't discuss our real lives, apparently.' Doris blew smoke out of the window, then gave Elisabeth a frank look. 'But what the hell. A couple of weeks ago I was working on reception at the Grosvenor, and this chap booked in. He must've overheard me talking French with another guest, because he asked me if I'd be interested in doing some translating for him. He took me for a drink, after I'd finished my shift, and then he started on about working for the government. I was a bit suspicious at first, I won't lie, but he turned out to be kosher, and here I am. What's your story?'

'I answered an advert in the newspaper,' Elisabeth began, only to be interrupted by a sharp rap on the door. A tall woman in her late thirties, with tightly curled red hair, dressed in an officer's uniform, strode into the room. Behind her came the soldier Elisabeth had met earlier, carrying a pile of clothing which he deposited on top of the chest of drawers before retreating.