



1

Late September 1939

Gunshots rang out across the parkland and Robyn slipped from a high branch of the willow tree, just managing to grab on to a lower one; the bark was coated in slimy green lichen. She'd climbed up to get a better look – something was happening at the Mansion. A blast pulsed through the air as she dug her nails into the bark to avoid sliding further.

From her vantage point up the tree on the island she'd watched steady streams of men in forces uniform arrive at the park. A new eight-foot fence, topped with barbed wire, framed the perimeter of the estate, but the tree's roots would snake under the fence no matter how high and wide they built it. Trees couldn't be locked out – the keys were in the seeds.

She thought about her favourite: the spiny seedpods that dropped from horse-chestnut trees and cracked open when

ripe to reveal all the potential future trees inside; a war couldn't stop *them*. Even though the war had, technically, started a few weeks ago, guards had appeared at the front and back gates first thing this morning, as if the enemy might descend on them at any moment. They hadn't stationed guards by the side gates at the end of the woods or by St Mary's Church, at least not yet, but Bletchley Park was starting to look like a prison, rather than her home. Another thunderous explosion sent her tumbling from the lowest branch. Even though she knew it was Mr Maelor testing equipment with the men in the stables, it felt far too real.

Cat-like, she landed on all fours, her hands resting on the ground confettied with leaves. The hairy white fingers of the willow mixed with the waxy glossy-green leaves of the beech. She jumped up and ran across the small island to where she had tied up her boat. Her breath ballooned in the cool morning air, a puffball of vapours. Robyn hopped into her boat, took up the oars and rowed swiftly back across the lake. Her father would be furious if he caught her out here. Mr Maelor and the men who had taken over the stables weren't just making a racket to pass the time; they were practising their defences. Her father *had* told her to stay away from the island, but it had slipped her mind, what with the excitement of the forces turning up!

As she rowed, the gunshots suddenly fell silent. She could hear the buzzing of darting billy witch bugs and other insects again. A chevron of Canada geese croaked out repetitive comeback calls as they returned from their dawn raids in the fields. They landed in a tightly knit V formation on the

lawn, looking like a regiment of soldiers. Watching the animals' daily routines made Robyn feel steady and safe. Whatever was going on in the war, and here at Bletchley Park, the geese were completely oblivious to it.

Robyn tied up her boat at the landing stage, hoping it wouldn't be the last time she'd be able to use it. Last night, her parents had put new rules in place. *No more rowing on the lake. No more bothering with the birds – and heaven help her if she were to try to bring any more wounded animals home. And no more swimming out to the island.* Might as well make up a rule to forbid her from having any more fun. Each day a little more freedom evaporated, and the park felt . . . strange, like somewhere she *used* to know.

She sprinted across the dewy lawn, sliding to a stop as military vehicles shook and shuddered their way up the drive. She could see her father from a distance, directing traffic. He'd been organising his garages, deciding which vehicles should go where. Of course, he'd told her none of this. She'd been following him for weeks, across the courtyard from their cottage to the garages. He'd told her that he wasn't the chauffeur any longer, but Head of Transport, and either his clipboard or his little black notebook seemed to be in his hand. A shot shattered the silence, far too close for comfort. Robyn looked up then covered her head instinctively. A pigeon burst from the sky, flying towards the Mansion roof at speed, its wings beating fast. It must have spotted a crack in the eaves and was looking for a place to hide; she couldn't blame it. She dropped to the ground, which was vibrating, sending pins and needles through her palms.

When it fell quiet, she got to her feet and ran as fast as she could back to the cottage. Change knotted itself around her throat, like one of the itchy scarves her mother insisted Robyn wore because of her *bad chest*. As far as she was concerned, she didn't have a bad chest, she was positively bursting with health! Her mother spent far too much time listening to episodes of *The Radio Doctor*. But Robyn had to admit, if only to herself, that her mother had been right. Everything would be different after today. The war – *the real war* – had arrived at their door, bringing with it enough danger to burn the whole house down. At least, that's what her father had said last night when he thought she was asleep. She made many interesting discoveries while sitting at the top of the stairs, in the dark.

The smart-looking convoy halted outside the Mansion. Robyn paused in the red-brick passageway between the two cottages to watch. Doors opened. People stepped out, their sensible shiny shoes crunching on the pebbles. She divided the strangers by their different-coloured uniforms. Their stripes spoke of rank and importance. Their purposeful chatter filled the air. Robyn's heart beat faster as she ran to the back door and booted it open, narrowly missing the milk bottles lined up on the step. The blue tits had been thieving again. The feathery crooks had drilled tiny holes through the foil with their beaks, siphoning off the fat-rich cream from the top of the bottle. The smell of tea and damp clothes drying enveloped her as she stepped into the kitchen.

'Oh, Robyn! Look at your boots,' her mother said, spinning around from the sink. 'Completely caked in duck muck. And they've only just come back from the repair shop.'

‘Sorry,’ she said uselessly, dropping her sketch book onto the kitchen table.

She started emptying her pockets of the pine cones and conkers she’d collected; she’d managed to find a massive conker, still cloaked in its spiky case, which looked like an armoured snail shell. There would be plenty of conkers tournaments at school now it was autumn, and this one was sure to beat anything Mary could find. The park boasted the best horse chestnut trees in Bletchley. Her father had told her that horse chestnuts could live for almost three hundred years; she wondered how old the ones at the park were.

‘You can clean your boots after,’ her mother said. ‘Sit down and eat your bread and jam . . . oh, and wait until your father gets in. He’s got something to tell you. And stop polishing those conkers! If you’ve a mind to polish, there’s plenty of dusting to be done.’

She was only allowed to bring the conkers into the cottage because her mother said they kept the spiders away. She didn’t think this was true at all, but if it meant she could bring more of the outside inside, she didn’t mind. Several pots of homemade jam were laid out on the table, but Robyn had lost her appetite. She always dreaded the words *wait until your father gets in*.

‘You’ll need to wash your hair tonight, mind. Thank goodness I cut it into a Princess Elizabeth bob; at least we’ll not be waiting all night by the fire for it to dry any more.’

A few days ago her mother had *set to* with the kitchen scissors, chopping Robyn’s hair. A black-and-white photograph of Princess Elizabeth’s neat bob guided her

mother as she hacked at Robyn's long chestnut waves. Mary's shocked face at school the next day had told Robyn all she needed to know about her new look.

'They want to see you up in the big house,' her mother said now.

Her mother called it the big house and some of the children at school called it the madhouse, but everyone else called it the Mansion. Rumours had spread that Bletchley Park was going to be an asylum for the mentally ill. She'd tried to deny it, but no one wanted to listen to the boring truth, especially from her, *the chauffeur's daughter*.

'Why? What do they want to see *me* for?' she panicked. 'I haven't done anything!'

'Hush, Robyn, the ladies next door are doing important work with Mr Knox. Keep your voice down,' her mother warned. She was already the ladies' number-one fan.

The ladies were unusual for women at the park because they didn't work with the other typists and administrators in the Mansion. Instead, they were closeted in Mr Knox's cottage. Robyn wasn't sure what they were working on, but they most definitely weren't typing up letters for grand-looking men in suits and uniform. They even had a nickname – Dilly's Fillies, which made Robyn screw up her nose and feel wriggly.

Her mother had started sending her next door with batches of Welsh cakes. They were firm favourites with the lady who always wore a bow tie, and had a bob, but carried it off with far more grace and style than Robyn could ever hope to muster.

Her mother cracked an egg against the mixing bowl. Robyn watched, transfixed, as the clear fluid slipped from

the shell. Two balls of sunshine. The double-yolker plopped into the base of the bowl, breaking her trance.

‘Am I not going to school today, then?’ she asked hopefully. School was dull as ditchwater. She’d far rather stay at home with her father and tinker with engines and cars in the garages.

‘No,’ her mother confirmed. ‘You’re not going back to school at all. In fact, you’re to stay put here for now. No more wandering off into the woods, or down to the river or . . . anywhere. Are you listening? Do you understand me? You’re not to go off site at all, Robyn. I’m serious, mind.’

‘What? Why not?’ Robyn sat up in excitement. ‘And what do you mean *off site*? You’re talking strangely, Mam. We’ve got nature day coming up and my birthday soon and Mary and I are going to try out our new conkers tomorrow. I can’t not go to school! Don’t be silly!’ She tried to laugh, but looking at her mother’s face, she wondered if she was serious.

She had thought she’d be stuck at school until she turned fourteen, which wasn’t for another whole long year. They weren’t going to let her leave early, were they? Or had her father given in? Was he finally going to let her join the other apprentices in the garages? She’d be the youngest. And the first girl. She wasn’t sure that it was even allowed, but who cared! She’d work ten times harder than all the boys in there. If her father gave her a chance, she’d be the best mechanic he’d ever taken on.

‘Sit still a minute. Your father will go up to the big house with you tomorrow.’

‘Am I not going back to school *ever*, then?’

‘I don’t know, do I? Stop asking so many questions. Your father will tell you. He should have taken you in there by now. They wanted to see you before today, but he’s been that busy with the new operation . . .’ Her mother stopped herself.

‘Busy with *what*? What new operation?’ she tried. But her mother was back on red alert, lips sealed and all secrets locked down.

It seemed this new operation might involve her and then she’d find out what *things* were going on in the garages. That must be why they’d decided to take her out of school. It all made sense if you thought about it. And all the better if she was allowed to start her apprenticeship as a mechanic slightly early. Maybe her father was waiting until her birthday to ask her. Or maybe he’d tell her during her first driving lesson with him. That would be the best birthday present ever!

‘So, that’s why I’m not going back to school – this new *operation* with Dad?’

‘Never you mind,’ her mother said. ‘Eat up. Then clean your boots, see to the hens and after that I’ve got a long list of jobs to keep you busy until your father gets home.’

Robyn stifled a groan at the prospect of one of her mother’s dreaded *lists*, but she bubbled with excitement at knowing her father was going to share a secret with her. Later, she’d find a way to sneak down to school at going-home time and let Mary know what was happening. Not that she had many details to share with her best friend. But if she didn’t tell someone that her boring school days were over and her real life was about to begin, she’d burst.



2

Pine cones dropped around her like grenades before being carried off by scavenging squirrels, while wood pigeons methodically stripped the trees of their autumn leaves. The clock house chimed three as Robyn pulled her bicycle out of the plum shed where she'd shoved it and had a quick look at the tyres. The front one was as thin and flat as a pancake. She could change a puncture no bother, but she'd have to sneak back inside to get her puncture kit from the scullery. And she couldn't do that without her mother spotting her. She shoved the useless bicycle back in the shed. She'd have to leg it if she wanted to catch Mary before she headed back to her digs at horrid Mrs Fisher's. Mary's evacuee digs were dreadful, but until there was a better offer she was stuck living with miserable Mrs Fisher and her whiny children.

Robyn looked around before setting off across the lawn in front of the Mansion at a run. People marched across the gravelled drive, folders and papers under their arms.

She noticed that what she'd thought was a shelter and had been empty earlier was now full of black bicycles. There must be at least twenty or so lined up in there. Whose were they and why were there so many of them?

They'd never had a bicycle shed at the park before. Mary would have spotted it, as she kept a close eye on things. Slowing down to a casual jog, Robyn made her way over. They were all adult bicycles, apart from one green one at the end.

Even though it was smaller than the rest it would still be a stretch for her, and there was no one around to ask if she could borrow it. All the same, she pulled it out and climbed on. When she put her feet on the ground and tested the brakes they seemed to work. She checked the white tyres. Both were plump and pumped.

Robyn set off on the path towards the woods then slammed on the brakes. She pulled her satchel off and placed it in the wicker basket on the front of the bicycle. *That's better. I look like I'm off to work or taking something important to someone somewhere – which I am.*

Mary was the most important person in her life. There was no way Robyn was going to leave school at the drop of a hat and not let her best friend know. But a worst-case scenario had kept her awake last night: Mary might be sent back home to Liverpool at any moment. Robyn didn't even have her address. They weren't supposed to share things like that any more because . . . *There's a war on, don't you know?* She had heard that so often since the prime minister had announced, at the beginning of the month, that, 'This country is at war with Germany.'

The green bicycle wasn't too bad. It was much easier to balance with her heavy satchel in the wicker basket. Inside was a book she had to return to Mary. She hadn't read it, but she didn't want to steal it by accident, and it might be difficult for them to meet up from now on.

Robyn bumped across the uneven pathways of the woods, taking care not to hit any tree roots. She didn't have time to fall off or damage a bicycle that wasn't hers. There were several logs piled up in the undergrowth. Someone must have been in the woods felling trees, which seemed a bit odd. She stopped and peered through a set of padlocked wrought-iron gates, into a graveyard. The coast was clear. There was enough room to squeeze between the wall and the gate on the left and pull the bicycle through behind her. She freewheeled down the lane to school, hands off the green bars, enjoying the wind in her short hair. She'd regret that later when she tried to get a comb through the knots, but for now it felt like she was flying.

School was in sight. Most people had already left, apart from a few boys still kicking a football around the yard. She screeched to a halt and her satchel catapulted out of the basket and landed by the gate. Coins scattered on the ground. She threw the bicycle down and dashed to pick them up. She'd meant to hide her subs money but had forgotten to empty her bag. The profits from her Bird and Tree club were growing. One day she was going to buy a car. Her father had promised he'd help her find an old one and they'd work on it together. And his present for her thirteenth birthday was to be her very first driving lesson!

'Owen! Oi! Owen? Have you seen Mary?' Robyn shouted

at one of the boys playing football. She picked up the last of her coins and shoved them back in her satchel.

‘Gone home,’ Owen said. ‘We doing Bird and Tree club today, then, or what?’

‘Nah, I haven’t got time. Next week.’

She wasn’t that keen on Owen being part of her club. He didn’t take the bird-spotting part seriously and he couldn’t draw for toffee. He was in it for larking about and being the first to climb to the top of the tallest tree. But she couldn’t turn down his money and he always brought some of his friends, so she tolerated him.

‘She hasn’t gone home. She’s gone for special lessons. *Extra* lessons,’ Thomas said meaningfully, as if Robyn should have known what her best friend was up to.

But this was the first time she had heard about it. She ran over and asked the boys, ‘Special lessons? With who? What for?’

‘Dunno. Prob’ly going to do posh exams or go to university, or something. She’s such a boffin. Mr Alquin’s pet, ain’t she?’ Thomas sniffed, wiping his nose on the back of his hand.

‘Girls can’t go to university, you idiot!’ Owen said, tackling Thomas and taking the ball.

‘Shows what you know, Owen James,’ Robyn retorted. ‘My Aunt Kate went to Oxford and my Aunt Eleri went to Cambridge, so there. And if anyone is going to go to university, it’ll be Mary and not you.’

‘Don’t care!’ Owen ended the conversation by booting the ball against the wall.

Except he did care, because Owen had been top of the class before Mary arrived. Robyn wasn't going to get anything else out of Owen and Thomas, as they were now arguing about the offside rule. There wasn't time to cycle to Mrs Fisher's either; not if she wanted to get back before her mother noticed she'd disappeared. She could write a note and leave it in Mary's tray in the classroom, but what would she say? Besides, she didn't have a pencil or paper, just her sketch book and Mary's book, and she didn't want to rip a page from either of those; although Robyn would never understand why, Mary's library books were precious to her. She'd have to come back tomorrow. And much earlier, if she wanted to catch Mary, in case she was going to sneak off for more special lessons with Mr Alquin. She and Mary told each other everything, or so she'd thought. Never mind, she'd find out about it tomorrow. It must have slipped Mary's mind, that was all.

'Oi! Have you got any spare jam jars for nature day tomorrow?' Owen shouted as she got back on her bicycle. 'We haven't got any and my mum says your mum will have loads, the amount of hedge jam she makes. Can I borrow some? I want to catch a frog or a toad.'

'Or an eel!' Thomas added.

'You won't fit an eel in a jam jar. Anyway, I don't know if I'll be in school tomorrow.'

She'd been looking forward to nature day for weeks and now she was going to miss it! Mr Alquin had promised that she could lead part of the lesson on bird-spotting. She'd been practising her talk to the ducks, who were a receptive

audience and only heckled a bit. And now it would all go to waste.

‘You don’t look poorly.’ Thomas picked up the football and held it under his arm while he stared at Robyn. ‘You’re red in the face. And very sweaty,’ he added helpfully.

‘Got to go!’ she shouted over her shoulder, readying herself to cycle back up the hill.

She squeezed through the gap between the ivy-covered wall and the gates. Thomas was right, she was hot and cross and must look a sight.

She didn’t expect to find a guard there.

‘And where do you think you’re going?’ he demanded. ‘You’ve never stolen a Park bicycle too, have you? Blimey, young lady, you *are* in trouble. Mr D will want to see you.’

Mr D, also known as the Commander, oversaw all operations at Bletchley Park. Essentially, he was her father’s boss. The very last person you’d want to be in trouble with.

‘You’d better come with me,’ said the guard and spun around, setting off at a pace towards the Mansion.



3

‘Enter!’ a voice beckoned from behind the heavy wooden door.

Robyn felt a bit queasy as the guard hissed, ‘In you go,’ under his breath before stepping aside. It reminded her of being summoned to Mrs Ashman’s study at school. With a sinking feeling in her stomach as she mentally listed all the possible reasons she could have been called to see the headmistress. She supposed Mr D was like the headmaster here, in charge of everyone and everything and always the cleverest person in the room. Her father, who called the Commander ‘a genius’, had once done an impression of him at the kitchen table for her mother, making himself look broader by puffing out his chest and taking on a gentle Scottish accent as he pretended to swing a golf club and called out, ‘Fore!’

An elegant bay window filled the small room with light. A deep-brown wooden desk dominated the room while a smaller one was set off in a recess to the side. A grand-looking coat, hat and umbrella stand stood to the right. Behind the

large desk sat a very tall, slender man; not at all what she'd expected. Although the room was fine, she'd have thought that Mr D's office would be bigger too, and more suitable for a commander.

Mr D was writing something on a piece of paper with a smart fountain pen. A woman sitting at the smaller desk was watching Robyn. The door shut behind her, and she was trapped with nowhere to run or hide. She stood in front of the large desk, wondering if all this fuss was really over a borrowed bicycle. She raised her chin and pulled back her shoulders.

'Miss Hughes, read out the charges, if you would,' the man instructed without pausing to stop or look up at her. He didn't have a Scottish accent and he wasn't wearing naval uniform, though she was certain her father had said the Commander was in the Navy.

'Theft of park property. Going off site without permission. Returning to site without signing in at the sentry gates or showing a pass. And speaking to civilians in a suspect manner,' Miss Hughes said officiously.

'And how do you plead, young lady?' The tall man finally stopped writing and adjusted his glasses to look at her as if he were a judge in a courtroom.

Robyn quickly began her defence. 'How am I supposed to show a pass? I live here, don't I? And I didn't steal anything. I only borrowed the bicycle because mine had a flat. I was on my way to put it back. There were loads of bicycles there, I didn't think anyone would mind . . .' Then she ran out of breath.

‘And there we have it, Miss Hughes. She *didn’t think*.’ The man tutted, placing Robyn’s satchel on his desk. The guard had taken it from her and must have given it to him.

‘Take notes, please, Miss Hughes!’ he ordered.

‘Yes, sir,’ Miss Hughes agreed, as if Robyn were a dangerous criminal.

‘And these civilians you were consorting with –’ the man began.

‘It’s only Owen and Thomas!’ she interrupted. ‘*They’re* not civilians. They’re boys. I asked them where my friend was, but they didn’t know.’ Her skin tingled as if it was being stroked by stinging nettles. Who had been watching her and why?

‘A likely story. And this is the satchel you were using to transport items off site?’ the thin man accused. ‘What were you delivering?’

‘Nothing! I wasn’t delivering anything, I’m hardly a dispatch rider!’ she joked. But her unnatural laugh echoed awkwardly in the silent room.

‘Wipe that smirk off your face!’ The man stood up, grabbed the satchel and spilt its contents onto the patterned carpet.

‘*No!* Those are my things!’ Robyn dropped to the floor to pick up her money, her sketch book and Mary’s book.

‘Stop right there!’ the man commanded, holding up one of his leather-gloved hands. ‘Don’t move an inch. Miss Hughes, collect those coins and papers and bring them to me. I need to inspect any incriminating evidence.’

Miss Hughes stopped taking notes and came over. She picked the items up off the floor and placed them on the desk.

‘Money, hmm. What were they paying her for?’ he asked Miss Hughes.

‘It’s mine!’ Robyn protested as he gathered the coins together and set them to one side, his attention drawn by her sketch book. This man couldn’t take her things, could he?

‘Indeed. And how, I wonder, does a girl like you get quite so much money?’

‘I earned it,’ she said.

He might not believe her if she told him about the Bird and Tree club. To be honest, she wasn’t sure she should be taking money off her classmates, but she wanted that car.

‘And these drawings? Why do you have so many of them?’ He passed her sketch book to Miss Hughes.

She had to stop herself from cannonballing across his desk to grab her sketch book from his spindly fingers.

‘They’re birds. I like drawing them.’ She shrugged. This was silly – they really were just sketches of the island and the animals and plants at the park.

‘And why do you have these? Engines and vehicles.’ He stalked behind her, as if he were a police officer questioning her in an interview room.

‘Oh.’ She’d forgotten about those; she knew she wasn’t supposed to be in the garages any more. Her father had told her so without giving her a good reason why. ‘They’re bits and bobs from Dad’s garage. New cars that come in and other ones that we fix up together. Or used to . . . I’m not allowed in there now. I used to draw what they looked like before and after, but I don’t go in there.’ She crossed

her fingers behind her back. 'Where is my dad? *I want my dad,*' she said under her breath.

'Oh, don't you worry. I will be speaking to your father about all this.' He waved at her pictures, the coins and Mary's book still lying on the floor.

'And what do we have here?' he asked as he bent down to pick it up before flicking through the pages.

'My friend's book. I was going to give it back, but she wasn't there.'

Robyn was relieved he'd stopped looking through her sketch book. But was she going to get Mary involved in whatever all *this* was?

'Are these letters?' He held out a circular scrap of paper.

'It's our language.' She shrugged. 'It's just a game.'

It had been Mary's idea to come up with their own language using two different letter wheels. It meant they could send notes that would look like nonsense to anyone else.

'What language? A code!' He looked sharply at Miss Hughes, who raised her neat eyebrows at him.

'Yes, so we can pass notes in class,' Robyn said.

She bunched her hands into fists at her sides to stop them shaking. They weren't supposed to write notes in class. Mr Alquin would be so disappointed in them both if he found out.

'File these, Miss Hughes, until we can decipher them,' he ordered.

'Yes, sir,' Miss Hughes replied, with an air of concern.

Robyn wished Miss Hughes would address the man by his name so she could remember it. Because if this wasn't Mr D, then who was he?

‘Were you given permission to leave site?’ The man put his hands behind his back and began pacing. He was starting to scare her.

‘No,’ she faltered. Her legs felt funny, as if she’d been standing up for too long.

‘Do you not understand simple rules? Are you not able to do as you’re told, miss?’ he spat at her.

‘Yes! I’m not stupid!’ She tried to defend herself, but her voice wobbled and cracked, giving away how upset she was.

‘And yet, here we are.’ He gestured around the room. ‘I will be keeping these papers and this book. Miss Hughes will examine them and then I will speak to your father to see how we will proceed in this matter. Dismissed!’

‘Can I have my satchel back?’ she asked. ‘And my sketch book?’ She didn’t really care about the bag, but her drawings were another matter.

‘Don’t be ridiculous. Miss Hughes, show her out and bring me her father. Immediately!’ the man ordered, picking up his pen and returning to his work.



4

As her father guided her under the arch, into the formal foyer of the Mansion, a barrage of noise greeted them. She'd always wanted to enter the Mansion but until yesterday she never had. She'd tried to sneak inside a few times, but one of the officious-looking men in uniform always stopped her. Last week, she'd made it as far as the kitchens before a chef in whites shooed her away, like a cat begging for scraps. The guard who'd caught her with the borrowed bicycle yesterday had escorted her in through the back, so she'd never been through the front before now. A second set of doors led into a dark wood-panelled hallway with a series of rooms opening off it.

Her father entered one of the rooms, whispering to her that he needed to speak to someone. As she followed him, she wondered how many times he had been inside the Mansion. Considering he worked down in the garages, he looked very much at home and seemed to know lots of people here. Maybe this was where he'd been spending most of his time

recently, instead of walking around the lake with her, or looking for tracks in the woods, or teaching her about all the varied species of plants at the park.

He didn't make time for her any more and she missed him. He even came home too late to go on their stargaze strolls, as he liked to call them. Apparently his father had taken him on them when he was a boy. They'd started their late night stargazing walks when she'd turned ten, much against her mother's wishes.

She wondered again what the tall thin man had said to her father to make him so furious with her last night. Her mother hadn't even spoken to her over breakfast this morning. The silent treatment was far worse than any shouting. At least with shouting it was over with and you knew where you stood.

Blackout curtains cloaked the large drawing room in gloom and, despite several lamps scattered about, it was still dark. Windows crisscrossed with brown tape made the space feel enclosed. Typewriters clattered and printers spat out long jagged sheets, punched with holes, that looked like paper snowflakes. Smart-looking women wearing headsets picked up the strips and marched off into the corridor with them.

The women looked clever, and they wore pressed shirts, navy skirts and heels. Most of them had applied mascara and a dash of bold red lipstick. Their floral perfume mingled with the smell of freshly roasted coffee brewing.

Terribly glamorous, Robyn thought, looking down at her school uniform in dismay. Her mother had done her

best to make Robyn presentable but somehow she always ended up looking scruffy.

She didn't know where these stylish women were taking the papers or why, but they held them carefully, as if they were extremely important. Robyn wished she could follow the women. And read what was on those sheets.

A rainbow of telephones sat on evenly spaced desks. There were black, green and even red sets, though she'd had no idea telephones came in any colour other than black. The red ones looked dramatic. Robyn was fighting the urge to reach out and pick up the receiver closest to her when her father reappeared by her side and tipped his head down to hers. His coarse whiskers brushed against her ear. She strained to hear him over the clicketty-clack of typing.

'We're to go upstairs. Remember what I said: tell the truth.'

She followed him out of the room towards a grand staircase next to a set of open double doors leading to a ballroom. Robyn wanted to run into the room and slide across the floor on her knees, but her father grabbed her arm.

'Answer their questions. And then keep your head down until they forget about you.'

She nodded, keeping her eyes on her feet as they climbed, so she wouldn't trip or tread mud into the thick burgundy carpet. At the top of the staircase they came to a pair of closed doors. She spied a further set of uncarpeted stairs leading upwards, but her father took her hand and led her along a gallery lined with dark and gloomy paintings in thick dull frames that looked so heavy they might topple

off the wall. The gallery reminded her of the last time she and her mother had gone up to London to see the sights. Her mother had dragged her around a desperately boring museum to stare at enormous paintings of every king and queen that had ever sat on a throne. Robyn sighed at the memory; what a waste of her last trip to the city. There'd be no more visits there now.

'Here we are,' her father said, nudging her through an open door. 'In we go, Birdy.' But a uniformed guard shook his head and blocked her father's way.

'No need. You've already signed,' he told her father.

'But she's just a child. She's my daughter. Surely I should . . .' her father began.

'No need. She'll be done soon enough,' the man said firmly, his arm still blocking the doorway.

'I'll be right outside, Birdy,' her father tried to reassure her as the door clicked shut in his face.

Why hadn't they let him come in with her? Robyn really was on her own.

She looked around to work out what this was all about. The room was square. There was a small fireplace, a few wooden chairs and a long table draped with an itchy-looking grey blanket. Three men, all without a hair out of place, sat behind the table in silence. She recognised the different uniforms: Army on the left and Navy on the right. And in the middle was the tall spindly man from the interrogation in the study.

'Sit down; we have a few questions we'd like to ask you,' said the thin man, gesturing to a chair.

‘Name, please?’ He hunched his shoulders, bending over a notebook in front of him.

Oh, so he wanted to exchange pleasantries today, did he? He hadn’t been very polite yesterday. Maybe he’d be different in front of these forces men. How two-faced. And highly suspect.

‘Name!’ he said again, more impatiently this time. His veil of manners was slipping already.

‘Robyn Audrey Lewis,’ she replied as if she were at school.

Which she ought to be. By the river with her friends and their jam jars, trying to catch specimens to study. Mary must have partnered with someone else. *Who?* Robyn wondered unhappily.

‘Age?’ he continued, without looking at her.

She had more time to observe him this morning. A slick black strip ran along his parting, dividing the rest of his greying hair.

‘Twelve. Nearly thirteen.’ She sat up straighter in the chair, trying out her best smile on the men. ‘It’s my birthday next month.’ She smiled wider, thinking about the driving lessons with her father.

There was no response. Robyn tucked her hands underneath her legs. She wouldn’t let the men see them shaking. She wished her parents had told her what this was all about, but they never told her anything these days!

‘Address?’ the man in the suit carried on.

‘Number 2 Cottage, Bletchley Park,’ she answered, stifling a sigh; this was a bit dull.

They’d always called their house *the* cottage, but now

there were Mr Knox and the ladies next door at number three. And there were some serious-looking men working in the bungalow opposite. So someone had numbered the cottages and theirs was now number two.

‘You walk to school, correct?’ The man in the suit spoke with authority.

‘Yes, that’s right. Church Green Road,’ she replied.

‘And at school, do the other children ask you questions? Those boys from yesterday, what were they asking you about?’ he prompted.

‘I’ve already told you.’

‘Did they ask you about here? Do the children at school ask you what’s going on here, at the park?’ he barked.

A salt-and-pepper beard concealed the lower half of his face, the hairs springing up around his lips like moss. He was still wearing the brown leather gloves.

‘Well, yes.’ She knew better than to lie, but their reaction made her wince.

The man’s long neck snapped up and the other two men sat forward in their chairs. *That was it!* He’d reminded her of a bird, and now she knew which one: a heron.

‘*And?* What do they ask you?’ The heron-man’s face changed; he looked excited.

Now she’d made the connection she couldn’t see anything *but* a heron staring back at her. The Heron looked eager, as if he couldn’t wait for her to answer, his jaw jutting forward.

‘Look, you’re not in trouble, all right,’ the Army man said. ‘We just need to know who paid you and what you told them.’

‘They only paid me because I set up a club. I teach them

how to climb. Half of them are useless at it and would break their arms and legs if I wasn't there. And I show them how to be quiet and spot things, as if they're in a hide.'

'Spot what things? Why are you hiding? And who are you spying for?' the Heron demanded.

'No one. It's not spying! Its bird-spotting,' she laughed. 'And when they ask me what happens here, I say it's about the war effort: secretaries and typewriters. Dull as ditchwater, I tell them; nothing exciting at all.'

The truth was she didn't know what was going on at Bletchley Park because no one told her anything. But that hadn't stopped her spinning out a few tall tales at school. When Mary had first arrived it had been raining and they'd all huddled in the cloakroom and Mary got out her tin of evacuee chocolates and raisins to share. Sarah-Ann, Kim, Lily and Ruby had quizzed Mary, interested in the new girl. Robyn could tell Mary didn't like the attention, so she had made something up about the park. Something dangerous. She exaggerated the rumours about the madhouse, until Mary's evacuee experience was as interesting as yesterday's fish-and-chip paper. But Robyn wasn't going to share *that* story with these men.

'And they believed you?' the Navy man clarified. 'The children at school?' His chair creaked as he leant forward. When she nodded, he looked suspicious.

'What about adults? Does anyone stop and ask you any questions?' The Heron took over again. He picked up his plain trilby hat, turning it in his hand by the brim as he waited for her response.

‘No. Besides, I’m not allowed to talk to strangers. I’m to go straight into school as soon as the bell rings,’ she fibbed, crossing her fingers out of sight.

Her mother had dinned it into her that she was to keep herself to herself and walk straight to school. ‘*No nonsense along the way!*’ But of course she didn’t go straight in. She usually had a quick turn on the swings and the witch’s hat and thought about skipping school. But she always chickened out in the end.

‘Good. *Good!*’ the Heron said.

The men were cautiously smiling, as if she’d passed a test she hadn’t known she was going to sit.

‘Now, it’s very important that you don’t talk to anyone about what goes on here,’ the Army man said. ‘The work we are conducting is of the utmost secrecy and vital to the war effort.’

He pulled some papers out of a briefcase.

‘Look, I don’t care what’s going on here, I just want my satchel back,’ she tried again.

‘Never mind your satchel. Sign this. In capitals,’ the Army man said, pushing a sheet of paper, yellow as cowslip, across the table.

‘What is it?’ She’d never signed anything in her life. ‘I should read it first, shouldn’t I?’

‘No time! Just sign!’ the Heron said, passing her a pen. ‘You should have signed this well before now,’ he told her, as if the fault lay with her. ‘Can’t believe the Commander is letting a *child* carry on living at the park.’ He turned away to speak to the other two men, as if he’d forgotten

she could hear him. 'If it was up to me, I'd have sent her away before now.'

'Aye, right enough! Should be adults only. Careless talk and all that,' the Army man chipped in.

The Navy man sighed. 'This is a place of work, not a playground.'

'If she'd been evacuated, as I suggested, it would have headed off yesterday's escapades at the pass,' the Heron said to the other two men, who nodded in agreement.

Why did he want to evacuate her? If Mary was being evacuated *to* Bletchley, why was this man talking about evacuating her *away* from Bletchley? She wasn't in any danger here; her father had said as much. No one was interested in a country house in the middle of nowhere. Thank goodness someone had stopped this man from sending her away. Now she had to keep her cool and not let him see that he'd rattled her.

His pen was heavier than it looked. She'd never written with a fountain pen. Mrs Ashman, their headmistress, kept one on her desk next to a pot of Velos ink, and if you'd done something worth celebrating she would write your name and then sign it at the bottom, and you could take the certificate home to show your parents. Robyn had never received a certificate but Mary already had two!

Although she didn't like to admit it, Mary was even better than Robyn was at sums. This didn't stop her from liking Mary even if her accent was different. Mary looked and sounded nothing like the other children in the class. Her father was from Jamaica and her mother from Liverpool, so her accent was a unique blend.

At first, some of the children had laughed whenever Mary opened her mouth. But once they realised she knew the answer to every one of Mr Alquin's hardest questions, they soon shut up. If only Mary was here with her now, Robyn thought. She picked up the pen, resting it snugly between her finger and her thumb, and began to read the document aloud in her best speaking-in-assembly voice.

'I'm going to read it before I sign it. "The Official Secrets Act –"' she began.

"Is a promise which, if broken, will result in death",' the Heron cut across her.

'*Death!*' The word shot out. 'My death?'

'Indeed. Shot by firing squad, hanging, or the maximum jail term in prison. Once you sign, you are liable to prosecution under the act for the rest of your life,' the Heron said.

Robyn stared at the three men in horror. Then realised, to her utter astonishment, that the Heron had placed a gun on the table in front of her.