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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

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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.