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THE SECRET LIFE

by Elizabeth McDavid Jones

Chapter 10

The Letter



The story so far: Although Bea said that a telegram had come from Mum, Susan is worried about her missing mother and has taken Bea's telegram to see what it really said.

It was short: SIR GEORGE UNABLE TO SEND REQUESTED FUNDS STOP REMINDS MISS RUTHERFORD OF HER DEFIANCE.

And signed by some official in the British Parliament. The telegram had nothing to do with Mum. Susan stuffed it into Bea's apron and began sopping up milk. Why was Bea getting a telegram from the British Parliament?

Then Bea's words came floating back: My grandfather... a member of Parliament... haven't spoken in years...

The telegram was from Bea's grandfather.

After dinner, Susan told Helen about the telegram and Bea's feud with her grandfather. "If Bea asked her grandfather for money," Susan said, "she must be desperate. But I don't understand it ---she paid our back rent as easy as buying tickets to the picture show."

"Maybe the money she gave Lester was all she had," suggested Helen.

"Maybe," Susan said, "but she wouldn't wire her grandfather for plain old spending money. Bea must need money for something really important."

Susan's voice turned grim. "It must have something to do with Mum coming home. You know what? I think it's something to do with Bea's secret. I have a feeling her secret's wrapped up in all this---the fight with her grandfather, Mum's disappearance, the telegram, everything. We've got to find that letter with the secret in it, Helen---tonight."

"You'll have to get Bea out of the house somehow," Susan told Helen, "so I can search her room." The girls decided Helen would ask Bea to take her to a Girl Scout meeting nearby.

After Lucy was tucked in and Bea and Helen were on their way to the meeting, Susan crept into Bea's room and pulled out the nightstand drawer. No letter. Bea must have moved it.

But where? Where should she look? Minutes slipped by as Susan wavered.

The dresser was as good a place as any. Susan checked each drawer carefully. The bottom drawer was heavy and always stuck, so Susan yanked hard at it---too hard. The drawer jerked loose from its runners and toppled out.

She stared, not believing what she saw under the

dresser where the drawer had been: Bea's framed photograph. The frame looked even shinier than before. She pictured Bea polishing it and sliding the drawer on top of it. Bea had obviously gone to great lengths to hide this photograph.

Why?

Susan studied the photograph for a clue. Something was nagging at her brain. Then she had it: The girl next to Bea looked like a younger Alice Paul, the speaker at the suffrage rally. Susan slid the photograph out of the frame to have a closer look. Out dropped Bea's secret letter.

Susan unfolded it and began to read. Her heart began to pound. The writer was asking Bea to come to America to help with "our cause." Goose bumps rose on her skin as Susan read again: "Your work must be kept secret for now."

What was the work Bea was to do?

Susan's eyes raced on, searching for the answer. "There are those among us," the writer went on, "who wouldn't approve of what you're doing. But when we've achieved our goal, no one will question our methods."

No one will question our methods. It sounded so grim.

Then Susan glanced at the signature and shivered. The letter was signed simply "Alice." But Susan could supply the last name---Paul.

The writer of Bea's letter was Alice Paul.

And the "cause" Alice Paul mentioned was the suffrage movement.

So Bea was a suffragist. That explained Bea's injuries Saturday night. She'd been injured during the riot at the suffrage rally.

But the letter left even more questions unanswered. What was the work Bea was doing for suffrage that had to be kept secret? And what did it have to do with Mum?

Susan wracked her brain for any detail that might help her make a connection between Bea's secret and Mum. She thought back to the night Mum disappeared, Bea hobbling in, walking past Susan and Helen with scarcely a hello, how strange it was that Bea didn't comment on Mum's absence.

And the fact that Bea hid the photograph. Why did she try to keep Susan from looking at that photograph? She couldn't have known Susan was at the suffrage rally. Maybe Bea was afraid Susan had seen Alice Paul's picture in the newspaper and would recognize her from the photograph. Why, though, would Bea want to hide her friendship with Alice Paul?

It came back somehow, Susan was sure, to Bea's letter and her secret work for suffrage. But the more Susan's thoughts went around, the more confused she felt. She didn't see how Bea's letter could have anything to do with Mum. Whatever Bea was doing for suffrage, surely Mum would have no part in it.

Which meant Bea's secret had led Susan nowhere.

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Tracking Down Mum