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THE SECRET LIFE

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Chapter 9

The Telegram



The story so far: Susan found out that Bea had paid the family's overdue rent without telling them. She has also learned that some women were arrested at the rally. Mum is still missing, and Susan is worried.

Mum still wasn't home by Sunday evening, and Susan's uneasiness turned to fear. Tomorrow would be Monday—a workday. If Mum didn't show up at the office tomorrow, she'd be fired. Something had happened. Susan tried to voice her concern to Bea, but Bea insisted there was nothing to worry about.

"Perhaps your mother made arrangements with Mr. Riley in case she had to stay longer."

Susan knew there was no such thing as "arrangements" for workers in Chelsea. If you displeased your boss, you lost your job. Bea's assurances were no longer enough. She would have to take action herself to find Mum. First thing tomorrow, she would wire Aunt Blanche.

After dropping Helen off at school, Susan went to the Western Union office and plunked down a quarter from her barbershop money to send the telegram. All morning, she hung around waiting for an answer. By three o'clock, she still had no answer, and she decided she'd better go on to the barbershop. When six o'clock arrived, Susan stowed her shoeshine kit and bolted for the door. The long walk back to the Western Union office seemed endless. All she thought about was her telegram and the reply that would surely be waiting for her. But there was no reply. Then it struck her that maybe she'd gotten no telegram because Mum was already home!

She raced to 26th Street and the familiar red tenement building. Somehow she knew Mum would be there. Mum would be at the stove in the kitchen, humming to herself as she fixed her girls their dinner. Susan burst through the kitchen door, but her hopes sank when it was Bea she saw chopping cabbage. Mum was not home. Bea was smiling. "I've got good news for you, love. I got a telegram today. You needn't worry anymore about your mum. She's enjoying her rest so much, she decided to stay on for a few more days."

Susan's first reaction was relief. Mum was safe. But as Bea's statement sank in, Susan's heart twisted: Mum, staying out of work simply to enjoy herself? It would never happen. Bea couldn't be telling the truth.

Susan opened her mouth to say so, then shut it quickly as she noticed Helen, sitting on the floor with Lucy. Helen looked troubled, and she was beckoning Susan toward the bedroom.

Once alone in their bedroom, Helen told Susan of the telegram's arrival. "I saw Bea's face when she opened it. The way she looked, it wasn't good news. But she wouldn't let me read it."

"What are you saying?" A lump of fear was gathering in Susan's stomach. Helen's voice was small. "I'm afraid something bad has happened to Mum, and Bea doesn't want us to know. Susie, I'm scared."

Susan pulled Helen close. "Don't be, sweetie. We don't know anything yet. We've got to get hold of that telegram and read it. That's all." "How? Bea's got it in the pocket of her apron. We'll never be able to get it from her."

"Let me think." Susan paced over to the window and stared out at the shops across the street. From here, she could almost read the labels on the cereal boxes stacked in the front window of Mr. Haggerty's grocery store. Then her mind jumped to the way Lucy always poured too much milk on her cereal. And then, Susan had an idea. She knew exactly how they would get the telegram from Bea.

At dinner that night, Susan ate slowly, waiting for her cue from Helen. Helen was chattering on, but Bea was only half listening; she was preoccupied with something. Susan hoped the telegram would tell them what.

Finally, Helen plunked down her empty cup. "I'm still thirsty."

Susan stood up. "I'll get the milk."

She filled Helen's cup but it slipped from her hand, splattering milk everywhere. Then Susan knocked over the milk bottle. A white river flowed onto Bea's lap and dripped on Lucy and Helen. Bea was soaked. A dark stain was spreading down her blouse, her apron, her skirt.

"Susie, you made a mess," said Lucy.

"Yeah," said Helen. "You managed to soak everyone, except yourself."

If Susan didn't know better, she would have thought Helen was really mad.

Susan hurried to help Bea take off her apron. "You better change, Bea, before you get chilled. I'll clean up out here."

"Come on, Lucy," said Helen. "You and I will have to change, too." Helen marched Lucy to the bedroom. "I suppose I should get into something dry," said Bea, "but I'll be back to help you straightaway." With that, she disappeared into her room.

Susan hated deceiving Bea. But Bea had brought it on herself by deceiving them first. Quickly, Susan plunged her hand in the apron pocket and fished out the telegram. She opened it with trembling hands.

Next Week, Chapter 10
The Letter