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THE SECRETS WE KEPT

Written by **Lara Prescott**

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Prologue

The Typists

We typed a hundred words per minute and never missed a syllable. Our identical desks were each equipped with a mint-shelled Royal Quiet Deluxe typewriter, a black Western Electric rotary phone, and a stack of yellow Steno pads. Our fingers flew across the keys. Our clacking was constant. We'd pause only to answer the phone or to take a drag of a cigarette; some of us managed to master both without missing a beat.

The men would arrive around ten. One by one, they'd pull us into their offices. We'd sit in small chairs pushed into the corners while they'd sit behind their large mahogany desks or pace the carpet while speaking to the ceiling. We'd listen. We'd record. We were their audience of one for their memos, reports, write-ups, lunch orders. Sometimes they'd forget we were there and we'd learn much more: who was trying to box out

whom, who was making a power play, who was having an affair, who was in and who was out.

Sometimes they'd refer to us not by name but by hair color or body type: blondie, red, tits. We had our secret names for them too: grabber, coffee breath, teeth.

They would call us girls, but we were not.

We came to the Agency by way of Radcliffe, Vassar, Smith. We were the first daughters of our families to earn degrees. Some of us spoke Mandarin. Some could fly planes. Some of us could handle a Colt 1873 better than John Wayne. But all we were asked when interviewed was, "Can you type?"

It's been said that the typewriter was built for women—that to truly make the keys sing requires the feminine touch, that our narrow fingers are suited for the device, that while men lay claim to cars and bombs and rockets, the typewriter is a machine of our own.

Well, we don't know about all that. But what we will say is that as we typed, our fingers became extensions of our brains, with no delay between the words coming out of their mouths—words they told us not to remember—and our keys slapping ink onto paper. And when you think about it like that, about the mechanics of it all, it's almost poetic. Almost.

But did we aspire to tension headaches and sore wrists and bad posture? Is it what we dreamt of in high school, when studying twice as hard as the boys? Was clerical work what we had in mind when opening the fat manila envelopes containing our college acceptance letters? Or where we thought we'd be headed as we sat in those

white wooden chairs on the fifty-yard line, capped and gowned, receiving the rolled parchment papers that promised we were qualified to do so much more?

Most of us viewed the job in the typing pool as temporary. We wouldn't admit it aloud—not even to each other—but many of us believed it would be a first rung toward achieving what the men got right out of college: positions as officers; our own offices with lamps that gave off a flattering light, plush rugs, wooden desks; our own typists taking down *our* dictation. We thought of it as a beginning not an end, despite what we'd been told all our lives.

Other women came to the Agency not to start their careers but to round them out. Leftovers from the OSS, where they'd been legends during the war, they'd become relics relegated to the typing pool or the records department or some desk in some corner with nothing to do.

There was Betty. During the war, she ran black ops, striking blows at opposition morale by planting newspaper articles and dropping propaganda flyers from airplanes. We'd heard she once provided dynamite to a man who blew up a resource train as it passed over a bridge somewhere in Burma. We could never be sure what was true and what wasn't; those old OSS records had a way of disappearing. But what we did know was that at the Agency, Betty sat at a desk along with the rest of us, the Ivy League men who were her peers during the war having become her bosses.

We think of Virginia, sitting at a similar desk—her thick, yellow cardigan wrapped around her shoulders

no matter the season, a pencil stuck in the bun atop her head. We think of her one blue, fuzzy slipper underneath her desk—no need for the other, her left leg amputated after a childhood hunting accident. She'd named her prosthetic leg Cuthbert and if she had too many drinks, she'd take it off and hand it to you. Virginia rarely spoke of her time in the OSS, and if you hadn't heard the second-hand stories about her spy days you'd think she was just another aging government gal. But we'd heard the stories. Like the time she disguised herself as a milk-maid and led a herd of cows and two French Resistance fighters to the border. How the Gestapo had called her one of the most dangerous of the allied spies—Cuthbert and all. Sometimes Virginia would pass us in the hall, or we'd share an elevator ride with her, or we'd see her waiting for the number sixteen bus at the corner of E and 21st. We'd want to stop and ask her about her days fighting the Nazis—about whether she still thought of those days while sitting at that desk waiting for the next war, or for someone to tell her to go home.

They'd tried to push the OSS gals out for years—they had no use for them in their new cold war. Those same fingers which once pulled triggers had become better suited for the typewriter, it seemed.

But who were we to complain? It was a good job, and we were lucky to have it. And it was certainly more exciting than most government gigs. Department of Agriculture? Interior? Could you imagine?

The fourth floor of the South Building was the Soviet Russia Division, or SR. It became our home away from

home. And just as the Agency was known as a boys' club, we formed our own group. We began thinking of ourselves as The Pool, and we were stronger for it.

Plus, the commute wasn't bad. We'd take buses or streetcars in bad weather, and walk on nice days. Most of us lived in the neighborhoods bordering downtown: Georgetown, Dupont, Cleveland Park, Cathedral Heights. We lived alone in walkup studios so small one could practically lie down and touch one wall with her head and the other with her toes. We lived in the last remaining boarding houses on Mass. Avenue, with lines of bunk beds and ten-thirty curfews. We often had roommates—other government gals with names like Agnus or Peg who were always leaving their pink foam curlers in the sink or peanut butter stuck to the back of the butter knife or used sanitary napkins improperly wrapped in the small wastebasket next to the sink.

Only Linda Murphy was married back then, and only just married. The marrieds never stayed long. Some stuck it out until they got pregnant, but usually as soon as an engagement ring was slipped on, they'd plan their departures. We'd eat Safeway sheet cake in the break room to see them off. The men would come in for a slice and say they were awfully sad to see them go; but we'd catch that glimmer in their eyes as they thought about whichever newer, younger girl might take their place. We'd promise to keep in touch, but after the wedding and the baby, they'd settle down in the furthest corners of the District—places one would have to take a taxi or two buses to reach, like Bethesda or Fairfax

or Alexandria. Maybe we'd make the journey out there for the baby's first birthday, but anything after that was unlikely.

Most of us were single, putting our careers first, a choice we'd repeatedly have to tell our parents was not a political statement. Sure, they were proud when we graduated college, but with each passing year spent making careers instead of babies, they grew increasingly confused about our states of husbandlessness and the rather odd decision to live in a city built on a swamp.

And sure, in summer, Washington's humidity was thick as a wet blanket, the mosquitos tiger-striped and fierce. In the morning, our curls, done up the night before, would deflate as soon as we'd step outside. And the streetcars and buses felt like saunas but smelled like a rotten sponge. Apart from a cold shower, there was never a moment when one felt less than sweaty and disheveled.

Winter didn't offer much reprieve. We'd bundle up and rush from our bus stops with our heads down to avoid the winds that blew off the icy Potomac.

But in the fall, the city came alive. The trees along Connecticut Avenue looked like falling orange and red fireworks. And the temperature was lovely, no need to worry about our blouses being soaked through at the armpits. The hot dog vendors would serve fire-roasted chestnuts in small paper bags—the perfect amount for an evening walk home.

And each spring brought cherry blossoms and busloads of tourists who would walk the monuments and, not

heeding the many signs, pluck the pink-and-white flowers off the trees and tuck them behind an ear or in a suit pocket.

Fall and spring in the District were times to linger, and in those moments, we'd stop and sit on a bench or take a detour around the Reflecting Pool. Sure, inside the Agency's E Street complex the fluorescent lights cast everything in a harsh glow, exaggerating the shine on our foreheads and the pores on our noses. But when we'd leave for the day and the cool air would hit our bare arms, when we'd choose to take the long walk home through the Mall, it was in those moments that the city on a swamp became a postcard.

But we also remember the sore fingers and the aching wrists and the endless memos and reports and dictations. We typed so much, some of us even dreamt of typing. Even years later, men we shared our beds with would remark that our fingers would sometimes twitch in our sleep. We remember looking at the clock every five minutes on Friday afternoons. We remember the paper cuts, the scratchy toilet paper, the way the lobby's hardwood floors smelled of Murphy Oil Soap on Monday mornings and how our heels would skid across them for days after being waxed.

We remember the one strip of windows lining the far end of SR—how they were too high to see out of, how all we could see anyway was the grey State Department building across the street, which looked exactly like our grey building. We'd speculate about their typing pool. What did they look like? What were their lives like?

Did they ever look out their windows to our grey building and wonder about us?

At the time, those days felt so long and specific; but thinking back, they all blend. We can't tell you whether the Christmas party when Walter Anderson spilled red wine all over the front of his shirt and passed out at reception with a note pinned to his lapel that read *Do not resuscitate* happened in '51 or '55. Nor do we remember if Holly Falcon was fired because she let a visiting officer take nude photos of her in the second-floor conference room, or if she was promoted because of those very photos and fired shortly after for some other reason.

But there are other things we do remember.

If you were to come to headquarters and see a woman in a smart, green tweed suit following a man into his office or a woman wearing red heels and a matching angora sweater at reception, you might've assumed these women were typists or secretaries; and you would've been right. But you would have also been wrong. *Secretary*: a person entrusted with a secret. From the Latin *secretus, secretum, secretaries*. We all typed, but some of us did more. We spoke no word of the work we did after we covered our typewriters each day. Unlike some of the men, we could keep our secrets.