

AMAZON ORIGINAL STORIES

SIGNAL MOON

A
Short
Story

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New York Times bestselling author of *The Rose Code*

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March 1943

Withernsea, England

When there was a war on, and when your part in it was so deadly serious it sometimes kept you from sleeping at night, there was really nothing to do but make jokes about it all. It was either make jokes or start weeping at your desk, so Lily made jokes.

“The wallpaper in this place is going to do me in,” she quipped an hour into her shift that Monday. “I can see my obituary now: ‘The Honorable Lily Baines, petty officer in the Women’s Royal Naval Service, twenty-two, dead of mid-Victorian chintz.’”

The others laughed, a welcome sound of cheer in the chilly parlor. The little seaside hotel, in which Lily and her fellow Wrens had spent nearly every day of the last year, had been made over into a listening station at the start of the war. The space was crammed with desks, naval message pads, and National HRO receivers with their cranky dials and chunky headphones. The only part of the room that still looked like a parlor was the wallpaper, pink blotches that might have been cabbage roses or maybe diseased kidneys, writhing across the walls and down the corridor outside, and in all the rooms upstairs where Lily and her fellow Wrens billeted in a welter of hideous china and starched doilies. “This whole place is a mid-Victorian howler,” Lily had decreed their first day, already slotted into her place as court jester, the one who kept everyone laughing.

And if she often felt like weeping from the stress and the fear and the endless grinding dread of it all, what did that matter? There was a war on; you pinned a smile in place and kept going.

“No daydreaming, Baines,” tutted Lily’s superior officer, a middle-aged woman named Fiddian who had a face like a fist. “Put those headphones back on.”

“Yes, ma’am.” Lily blew on her mittened fingers. No one bothered to take off the coats bundled over their uniforms; it was far too cold. One of the advantages of joining the Wrens was supposed to be that sleek, dashing, brass-buttoned uniform (designed by Molyneux!), but no one ever saw the uniform here; Lily and her fellow Y Station listeners spent every shift bundled to the ears.

“When I joined up, I thought I’d be shipping off somewhere hot and exotic.” Lily’s desk-mate sighed during their next loo break down the hall.

“Help fight the Hun, yes, but somewhere warm. No one ever said anything about getting shipped off to *Yorkshire*.”

“Yorkshire’s a bally marvel,” Lily said loyally, washing her hands. She’d grown up in York not sixty miles away, her father’s town house a stone’s throw from York Minster even if Father spent most of his time in London. And all right, Withernsea wasn’t exactly going to bump the pyramids of Giza off the list of the world’s wonders anytime soon, but—

The other Wren snorted as she toweled off her fingers. “Don’t try to tell me this place is what you had in mind either, when you heard *Join the Wrens and see the world*.”

“No use getting a fit of the dimals about it,” Lily said bracingly, swinging out of the loo and back toward her desk. “Keep your chin up!” She could practically hear her father in her own words—he was off at the Foreign Office, but the frown of the fifth Viscount Baines had no trouble at all curdling the marrow at two hundred miles plus. And nothing made him frown like *bloody defeatism*. Doing your bit with a stiff upper lip and no grousing—that was the Baines family tradition, even before the war. Father always liked to say that if his children had *the Honorable* stuck in front of their names, then by God they were expected to earn it, and Lily agreed with that; really, she did.

So she pushed down her own fit of the dimals and slid the big Bakelite headphones back over her ears. Cold enclosed rooms, headphones, and secrecy—that was a Y Station listener’s world in a nutshell. Reaching toward her wireless receiver, she began turning knobs and went hunting.

It hadn’t seemed like hunting when she was doing her training course in Wimbledon over a year ago as a newly assigned special duties linguist. It had been serious business, of course, but there had been a certain fierce pleasure in learning to do it, and do it well: tuning her ears to the next room where a chap with a microphone droned a never-ending series of call signs, code groups, and German words, and Lily and a cluster of German-speaking Wrens scribbled on their pads, straining for every syllable. *Can you repeat that?* one of the girls had been foolish enough to ask, and the snap from the next room came right quick: *Are you going to ask the Nazis to just repeat that, when you’re taking down their transmissions in the North Sea?* It was all about learning to listen with every spark of energy you had, straining to hear as the teachers started building in interference: fading signals, interrupted signals, aural chaff (*Write down exactly what you hear,*

and no guessing, girls!). Lily would exchange delighted grins with the others when they got a message clear; they'd compete to see who was best at parsing the transmissions.

But here in Withernsea, everything was deadly serious: they were intercepting live radio communications sent to enemy vessels, the same vessels that hunted their countrymen. Lily saw her quarry the moment she first sat down at this desk: wolf packs of U-boats knifing through the waters of the Atlantic, German surface vessels poking their ugly snouts through the Baltic, looking for soft Allied flesh. She didn't have a brother out there, thank God—hers were both too young—but she had a whole flock of cousins, a pack of school friends, an entire flotilla of old beaux she'd fox-trotted and waltzed through her deb season with. Willy, Terry, John, Phil, Arthur, Kit, Andrew, Eddie, Dickie, Alan, Fred . . . Just running the list in her head, the ones she could lose, sent an icy hand of pure terror clawing down her throat.

Chin up, she told herself again, fingers resting on the knob like a pianist's on the keys, sliding the length of the band. German transmissions, always to be found in the 4, 8, and 12 MHz bands—ship-to-ship communications fell in the 30 to 50 MHz band. Listening through the static, through the fuzz, sliding slowly along the frequencies. (*Have my ears grown? Lily wondered sometimes in the bleariness of late-shift exhaustion. Do they stick out from my head like platters, the way I strain and swivel after radio chatter so many hours and hours and hours a day?*) Straining, straining, straining, never knowing when a voice in German would suddenly jump into your ears. Two hours of static droned through her headphones tonight before a nasal Teutonic tenor emerged; Lily gave a sharp knock on the desk, and dimly heard one of the other Wrens calling, "We've got a Jerry ship up. Call Fiddian—" Lily was already writing with one hand, transposing the drone of German letter groups as her left-hand fingers poised on the knob, ready to track the voice if it disappeared back into static. She lost the signal in the middle, got it back within seconds, only a few letter groups dropped out there . . . It was all ciphered, just gibberish in five-letter clusters, but she didn't have to make sense of it. She just wrote until her hand burned and listened till her ears bled, the entire person and essence of the Honorable Lily Baines stripped down to a pair of ears and a pair of hands.

When the call sign marked the close of transmission, Lily stripped off her headphones and passed the naval message pad back over one shoulder. “Call Station X; we’ve got a message to put through on the teleprinter.” Her mouth was dry, and she was sticky with sweat under her coat.

“Nice work, that was a tricky one,” Fiddian said briefly, and went off to ring Station X, which was Bletchley Park. Lily wasn’t supposed to know that, but motorcycle dispatch riders queued up every morning to take satchels of bundled transmissions from the Withernsea listening station and buzz off south toward Station X, and one of the lads had incautiously said something about *Bletchley Park* and what a ruddy lunatic asylum it was, so presumably it was the same place where a good many of Lily’s chums were employed.

“Darling, why don’t you join us?” one of her ex-deb friends had written. “They need girls here with topping good German, and after that summer in Munich before your presentation, don’t tell me you haven’t got your genitive and dative cases sorted!” But Lily was already here in this converted listening station perched on the mouth of the Humber where the wind ripped across the world like a knife, and as for her friends at Bletchley Park, who knew *what* they were doing. She certainly couldn’t ask—you *don’t need to know* was always the answer to that kind of question—but probably they were sitting in cold rooms with hideous mid-Victorian wallpaper, like Lily, making some kind of sense out of these transcribed, encrypted German naval communications.

Which might be anything. Birthday telegrams to the Führer, weather reports, gossip about blinking Wagner concerts at blinking Bayreuth—or lists of American convoy ships they’d sunk, how many tons of supplies had gone to the bottom of the sea rather than into English supply depots and English stomachs. Lists of how many English sailors had died screaming in the North Atlantic.

Willy, Terry, John, Phil, Arthur, Kit, Andrew, Eddie, Dickie, Alan, Fred
...

“Midshift break,” the girl at the next desk groaned. “Finally!”

The other Wrens went off to the kitchens for a cup of hot strong tea and a smoke, but Lily headed along the promenade by the water, whitecaps shattering below in fitful bursts of spray. A crop of faux castle turrets looked out over the water at the end of the promenade, pasted over with war posters: “Keep Mum, She’s Not So Dumb!” Did you really need a war, Lily

wondered, to remind men that women weren't stupid? Of course you bally well did.

She had the promenade to herself—everyone sensible had their feet up by the fire, tucking into slabs of plum duff and slugging strong tea. So Lily faced the whitecaps and let out a shriek—a really good, ear-ripping howl that scraped the inside of her throat like a garden rake. Because she didn't know how much more of this she could take; she really didn't. She could quip and joke all she liked, but in truth, she was terrified.

Because whatever they were doing here, and at Station X, wasn't enough. You didn't have to be a genius to tally up the number of ships reported sunk in the newspapers and know it was too many. That it was more than three years into this blasted war, and victory wasn't anywhere nearer, no matter how many triumphant V signs the PM flashed at the cameras. Three years into this war, and everything was just colder, grayer, bleaker. Three years into this war, and it seemed to Lily that all they were was three years closer to seeing German tanks roll through Hyde Park. Probably over the bodies of Willy, Terry, John, Phil, Arthur, Kit, Andrew, Eddie, Dickie, Alan, and Fred.

But that was *defeatist guff*, as her father would have said, so Lily Baines swiped the tears off her cheeks before they could freeze and trudged back toward the hotel. Because Fist-Face Fiddian got out the thumbscrews if you were even thirty seconds late, and because she had a job to do.

Lily ended up working a double shift, and it was half an hour to midnight before another voice slid out of the static through her headphones. Pulling her message pad over and preparing to record, she blinked as she realized it was actual sentences coming into her ears rather than encoded gibberish—and that it was English, not German.

“This is November Kilo acting as Afloat Comms Control, broadcasting in the clear.” A man's voice, baritone, the words tense and crisp but finished off with a rounded drawl. That wasn't just English; it was American English. Lily fiddled the dial, finding her way through some static. “All ships comms check. Let's run 'em by the numbers, people. Over.”

She frowned as a series of replies came through more bursts of static. Was this the kind of radio discipline the Yanks kept? Surely they should be keeping silent if they were out on the North Atlantic. Unless this was a ship in the yards somewhere, safe and having a little fun on the night shift.

“Comms control, good to hear your voice and fuck you very much too. Over,” came the retort. Lily wrinkled her nose—language!

The baritone with the drawl answered. “Maintain radio discipline, and watch your fucking language, November Xray. Over.”

Lily called over to Fiddian. “I’m picking up an American ship. Non-ciphered traffic.”

“Don’t bother recording,” Fiddian said, and Lily obediently kept searching for German transmissions . . . but she found herself checking in on the drawling baritone every time she passed through his frequency on the band. That voice was always there; when she passed through it a third time, he was saying something about how the berthing racks here were a lot shorter than the beds at the Grand Hotel in York. She found herself smiling.

Over on the next desk, one of the other Wrens had picked up a German voice on a different frequency; yet another transmission had popped up for a Wren on the other side of the room. “Baines, you keep scrolling,” Fiddian ordered, efficiently whipping back and forth between the other two desks, and Lily nodded, keeping at it. The next time she passed through the frequency with the Yank, he was telling a riddle on the air: “‘I am unbreakable. Even when you break me, I remain unbroken. What am I?’ Over.”

Lily tilted her chair back, waiting for the answer, but there was a burst of static, and then the voice was back, suddenly deadly serious, snapped taut as a steel wire: “This is November Kilo acting as Afloat Comms Control, now setting General Quarters. I repeat, this is November Kilo now setting General Quarters. All hands manning battle stations, all equipment set to battle short. Reason for General Quarters is potential hostile contact. All ships acknowledge. Over.”

Battle stations? The flesh on Lily’s arms prickled. Through the headphones, she heard a distant *bong bong bong* of a ship’s bells, the tense drone of a voice over speakers. More bursts of static, other ships replying . . . Lily sank her teeth into her lip, looking around for Fiddian, but her superior had her hands full with the two German transmissions already being monitored. Routine German surface traffic by the sound of it, but Lily still couldn’t pull her off it. Picking up her pen, she began scrawling down everything that poured into her ears. The Americans were running tense check-ins every ten minutes; there were references to a ship called the *Invincible* that had apparently disappeared some days earlier. Wait, *when*

had that happened? Lily circled the date unbelievably on her message pad as she heard it transmitted. Thirty minutes passed . . . forty-five . . . an hour

—

Then the familiar baritone drawl pierced everything on a sudden rising pitch: “Vampire, vampire, vampire, multiple vampires inbound. November Kilo portside, all ships prepare countermeas—” The explosion rocked her ears. For a moment, Lily thought a Luftwaffe shell had hit the hotel; she nearly fell out of her seat before she realized it had come through the headphones, shrieking into her eardrums with a shattering bang. Bringing her chair down with a thud, she dimly heard the baritone voice through her own ringing ears, shouting now:

“USS *Colin Powell* is hit, repeat, USS *Colin Powell* is hit portside amidships, multiple vampire strikes with extensive flooding and loss of multiple primary systems. This is ST1 Jackson reporting on USS *Colin Powell*—”

Lily’s lips parted to answer him, but she had no transmitter. All she could do was listen.

More explosions.

Then the screams.

Then the dying.

Beginning to end, it took forty-two minutes.

“Baines, it was a silly hoax. Some lads messing about with an illicit broadcast.”

“I don’t think so, ma’am.” Lily’s teeth were still chattering. “The other end of this transmission—I heard the shrieks as water began filling the compartment. I heard the men clawing to get out. I heard the moment they realized they were trapped and were going to die. I don’t think that’s the kind of thing you can fake.”

“Actors die dramatically every night of the week at the Old Vic in London,” Fiddian said, clearly cross now. “I’ll submit a complaint, make no mistake. All transmitters were supposed to be turned in at the start of—”

“Ma’am, *please* look at my transcription. If you see here, ST1 Jackson was saying—”

“I have looked. ST1 is not a real rank, even among the Americans.”

Lily couldn’t argue with that, but she knew the man named Jackson was a navy petty officer, and so was she, and that meant she owed him a measure of belief. “But as he was saying—”

“Baines, it doesn’t matter what he was saying. You said you heard them give *this* date in the transmission?” Jabbing a finger at the date Lily had scrawled. “This alone proves it’s all bunk.”

“I know how it looks.” *Do I?* Lily thought. The date *was* bunk; every drop of common sense said so . . . but those forty-two minutes of broadband agony kept swirling in her head. She’d been a Y Station listener for over a year, the best in the bunch here at Withernsea. Lily Baines, a petty officer with fingers like a pianist and ears like a bat. Maybe common sense should have balked at the date, but it was long after midnight, near the witching hour when all things were possible, and she’d just heard countless souls die screaming through her headphones.

And it was more than that. The Wimbledon training made you trust your ears, not your ingrained reactions. *She knew what she’d heard.* “If we can just entertain the possibility—”

“You’re due for a weekend off, Baines. I suggest you take it starting now. You’re clearly beginning to feel the strain.”

Lily argued for another fifteen minutes, but it was useless. Numbly, she stood clutching her sheaf of transcribed notes. If Fist-Face Fiddian wouldn’t take it up the ladder, no one would listen to a humble Wren like Lily. Station X didn’t know her from Adam. Neither did anyone on the Admiralty lines. If she rang her father and tried to get him to use his Foreign Office connections, he’d think she’d gone mad—he loved his daughters, but he thought all young girls had nothing but fluff and feathers between the ears. And wasn’t that what most important men thought? Who was going to listen to a Y Station listener with a story that sounded admittedly, utterly barmy? She could find herself reprimanded, even taken off duty or transferred . . .

Lily reversed out of the parlor, taking the stairs two at a time up to the row of hotel bedrooms that had been converted to billet the Wrens. At the end of the corridor was a telephone—to its right, the room Lily shared with a tart from Epping who snored like a foghorn. She hesitated at the head of the corridor, realizing her teeth were still chattering. She could toss this agonizing, impossible transcription in the bin, head to her room, and sleep till noon.

Or she could make the telephone call she’d been half planning even as she approached Fiddian with her scribbled transcription. Because she’d had to give Fiddian a go, of course she had to, but that didn’t mean she’d

thought it would work. It didn't mean she hadn't immediately thought of an alternate option.

You don't have to think of alternate options, she thought, eyeing her bedroom door. Whatever this thing you heard, it isn't your business. You could just go to sleep.

"Do your bit and no grousing," she said aloud, and went for the telephone.

A moment later, Uncle Andrew's familiar voice boomed sleepily into her ear. "Lily? It's the middle of the *night*, m'dear, are you—"

"Everything's fine, Uncle Andrew. Sorry to ring so late, but I've got a question for you. A legal question."

"Lord, girl, come to York on your next day off and ask me then. I'll treat you to a splendid tea at the Grand."

"I'm afraid it can't wait." Lily squeezed against the wall, letting a Wren tramp past in her robe, making for the shared loo.

"Out with it, then." She could hear her father's brother getting interested despite himself, probably standing in his dressing gown in his study, yawning, potbellied, and shrewd.

Lily took a breath. "Is it possible to prepare something with a solicitor to be delivered at a certain date, to a certain person? A date in the future?"

"Certainly. Can't think how many times I've been trusted to have documents couriered over in three weeks' time, once the client has had a chance to get their own financials in order first." A cynical chuckle. Uncle Andrew took a dim view of humanity.

"I'm going to need you to do that for me." Lily let her breath out, plans tumbling in her head every which way. "I'll be taking the train up tomorrow morning—I'll bring something by the office, with instructions on when and where it's to be delivered. I'll pay for you to keep it till it needs to be couriered over."

"No need for that, m'dear! Doesn't cost me a thing to pop an envelope in a drawer for you for a few weeks. What's the notion, eh? Dropping a letter to a beau, and you want it arriving the day before he ships out?"

"Not a beau, and it's more than an envelope, and you'll be holding on to it for more than just a few weeks." Lily sifted mentally through her savings. This was going to just about finish them, she reckoned. "Please mark the delivery for ST1 Matthew Jackson, who will be checking into room 202 of the Grand Hotel in York."

Lily heard Uncle Andrew scribbling on the other end of the line. “What day?”

She felt a last teetering moment’s disbelief, looking at the date she’d scribbled down disbelievingly as she heard it trickle through her headphones. *Am I really doing this? Do I really believe this is real?*

She exhaled a long breath. “The ninth of March, the year two thousand twenty-three.”

March 9, 2023

York

ST1 Matt Jackson was looking forward to being back at sea. Three years at a listening station in Yorkshire wasn’t a bad gig, but sitting in a boxy room staring at screens wasn’t the same when the floor wasn’t rocking under you with the swells of long rollers.

Matt hauled his bag over one shoulder and swung toward the hotel: a tall, loose-limbed Texan in old jeans and a blue jersey, sleeves pushed back over the two scrolled lines of poetry he’d had tattooed on the insides of his forearms when he’d become a signals technician:

Of doubt and dark they feed their nerves;

The signal moon is zero in their voids.

“Ohhh, that’s *deep*,” an English girl had said to him in a bar, his first night in England, three years ago. Then he’d spent the next hour trying to convince her that no, just because he’d grown up in Texas didn’t mean he’d ever roped a steer or had an oil well in his backyard. Matt liked Britain, but he’d be glad not to have *that* conversation for a while.

Four days, he promised himself, thinking of the sea in all its moods. The flat glassy calm of Sea State Zero, the stiff chop of plowing through a good headwind, the pitching tilt of a deck on a blustery morning when the sea boiled with pods of dolphins riding the wake . . . Four days of leave in transit, then the new orders: ST1 on the USS *Colin Powell* out of Rota, setting out for operations in the North Atlantic.

Supposed to be some spooky shit going on out there, Matt mused, shifting his bag to his other shoulder as he sauntered through the hotel doors. Some kind of new tech, very hush-hush. Whatever it was, he’d be in the middle of it, locked behind two sets of cipher locks and security clearances: those tiny rooms alight with screens and signals, air-conditioned to arctic temps to keep the servers’ heat down, the rack of jackets you

reached for the moment you stepped inside. Cold enclosed rooms set to eternal twilight; headphones; and secrecy—an ST’s world. It wasn’t exactly James Bond, but there wasn’t any way to explain to outsiders—people who *didn’t* live their lives hunting signals through headphones—that it was better than James Bond. A lot smarter, anyway.

James Bond sure as hell would have liked this hotel, though. Matt whistled as he looked up at the high corniced ceilings of the Grand, all black-and-white marble floors and broad gilt-railed stairways climbing upward. He hadn’t known the Grand was this nice. Now he was kinda wishing he had a little longer than four days before he’d be out to sea, sleeping on a rack three inches too short, because whoever built berths on ships was under the impression no US Navy sailor ever topped six feet.

Matt had just checked in at the burnished front desk (“Goodness, all the way from Texas! Tell me, have you ever—” “No.”) when a voice hailed him.

“Mr. Matthew Jackson?” said a supple silver-haired man in an expensive checked suit, rising from a chair by the staircase and advancing with a package in his arms. “That is, ST1 Matthew Jackson?”

“Who’s asking?” Matt responded politely but warily. STs didn’t tend to flash their rate and rank out in town, especially overseas.

“Edward Carrington, representative of Baines & Morrissey.” A business card on expensive stock was proffered—the man looked bemused as Matt promptly snapped it with his phone’s camera. “Would you mind showing me some identification?”

“If I can see yours.” Matt snapped the man’s license too; looked up the legal firm (legit); looked up Edward Carrington (also apparently legit) as the man stood looking increasingly curious. “Can I help you?” Matt finally asked, opening his passport to show his own name and photograph.

“Yes, well. I was told you’d be here today, but no one knew exactly *when*. Good thing the chairs are comfortable. I believe you’re in room 202?”

Matt checked the hotel key he’d just been handed—202. How did this guy . . . “I don’t really like giving my room number out, thanks.”

“Yes, it was mentioned you might be a bit cagey,” Carrington murmured, hefting the package in his arms. “Still, I believe that satisfies things on our end. Here you are, sir.”

He handed over some kind of box, nearly the size of a carry-on suitcase. Matt juggled its surprising weight, calling, “Hey, what—” but Carrington had already disappeared through the hotel doors.

Puzzled, Matt hauled the box and his bag upstairs to room 202, dumped both on the pristine king-size bed, and took a moment to look out the window at the expanse of York’s skyline before turning back to the package. The box looked old, its leather binding splitting, but someone had attached a very modern padlock to the front and taped the key to the top. No label to say whom it was from.

“Opening the box,” Matt said aloud, “is how the horror movie starts.”

But the occupational hazard with his line of work was curiosity. You couldn’t spend your career solving puzzles without getting a fairly insatiable case of *need to know*, especially when you spent so much time hearing *That’s outside your swim lane, Petty Officer*.

What the hell. Probably a prank anyway. Matt went for the key.

It took him a moment to realize that the thing inside was a radio. Jesus, had radios ever changed since they made monsters like this bulky thing with headphones and transmitter. He ended up hauling it out onto the fluffy down comforter, examining it from every angle. Second World War era? Surprisingly good condition. Matt felt around the case, finding some scraps of yellowed paper: a series of dates, a list of what looked like radio frequencies—a World War II frequency rota, what the hell . . . and a letter in an envelope, the outside marked *Petty Officer Matthew Jackson*.

Dear Petty Officer Jackson . . .

(Maybe handwriting didn’t have gender, but Matt was laying odds this was a chick. Very few guys he knew wore flowery cologne, and this envelope smelled very faintly of lily of the valley.)

There is no way in the world you will believe what I’m going to tell you, but if you tune this wireless receiver to the first frequency on the enclosed list and transmit your position, we’ll give it a go. I’ll pop in on that frequency every day at noon York time until I hear from you. Hopefully the wireless is in condition to transmit; please find a second battery of the correct type enclosed, just in case.

You’re probably wondering who I am—a special duties linguist in the Women’s Royal Naval Service. I

have no idea what rank an ST1 is, but I know you are a petty officer in the United States Navy—as a fellow petty officer, I am begging for a moment of your time. Please hear me out.

He couldn't read the looping signature—*L* something. Matt laughed out loud. *Definitely* a prank. Mentally thumbing through which friends might have pulled this off at long distance, Matt glanced at the clock. Nearly two hours to noon, but the wireless was old and tricky, and it took him a while to get her going. He ended up calling down to room service for water, vinegar, lemon juice, and salt (“Tea to go with that, sir?” asked the puzzled woman on the other end) and hunkered down to polish the flakes of rust out of the dials, figure out how the old-fashioned band worked, and test the battery. He was already composing a reply once he figured out who was on the other end: *Thought you got me, you assholes; think again.*

Noon. He glanced at the handwritten list and tuned the receiver to the first scribbled frequency. “Jackson here,” he found himself saying, leaving off his rank. “That’s Juliet Alpha Charlie Kilo Sierra Oscar November, any station this net, QSL QSB K.” Pause. “OK, guys, what’s the joke? Over.”

A crackle of static, and then a woman’s voice came blaring out, so loudly that he jumped. “Oh my God. My God, it’s you. I didn’t think—oh my God.”

Upper-crust voice, very British, definitely female. He’d guess early twenties. Matt’s buddy Dailey from C-School had a Brit girlfriend; had he enlisted her for the prank? Matt grinned, leaning back on one elbow in the fluffy stack of pillows. “OK, joke’s up. Where’d you get a forties-era set? Over.”

“Absolute bally nightmare, let me tell you,” the woman said, words still clipping out in a gulping rush. “No one’s s’posed to have transmitters—they should have all been turned in—but my father, you know, Foreign Office, thinks rules don’t apply to him, or maybe he just blinking forgot, because there they were, *three* sets with transmitters in the basement when I went back to the town house on leave. I’m lucky he’s always been a bit of an amateur ham-radio fanatic—”

“Look—” Matt tried to say, but she was still transmitting in a headlong flow.

“And I’m utterly in the basket if he finds out I borrowed two of his sets, but I couldn’t take any from the listening station; I’d be in the brig and no

daffing about.” She swallowed audibly, cutting herself off. “This is really Matt Jackson? And it’s really the ninth of March, *two thousand twenty-three?*”

“Yeah,” he said, utterly mystified, sitting up with a faint prickle in the back of his mind. “Why wouldn’t it be?”

“Because I didn’t know if my uncle would take me seriously and set up the delivery for something that far ahead, no matter how important I made it sound. Because I didn’t know if his firm would still be around to do it. Because even if it was, I didn’t know if you could work the receiver, or if it would even function by that time, or if you’d chuck my note in the bin.” Another gulp that sounded half like a laugh and half like a sob. “Because apparently I’m *not* crazy. You’re Matt Jackson, and that’s two thousand twenty-three.”

“OK.” Matt swung his legs off the bed, still speaking into the transmitter. “You’ve got thirty seconds before I file this whole joke under ‘Life’s Too Short’ and head to the nearest bar. Who are you?”

“Petty Officer Lily”—crackle of static; sounded like *James*—“Women’s Royal Naval Service.”

“That’s your name, huh?” Matt raised an eyebrow, even if she couldn’t see it. “Lily James plays you in the movie, right. Look, whoever set this prank up, did you really think no US sailor has seen *Downton Abbey?*”

Her turn to sound mystified. “What?”

“OK, Lady Rose, it’s been fun. Nice try, but I’ve got beer to drink and dinner to eat. Talk to you later.”

He thought she’d try to keep stringing this along, but she just sighed. “Keep the wireless. I’ll be here at the same time tomorrow, on the second frequency on the list. Come back when the USNS *Invincible* goes missing in the North Atlantic.”

Matt straightened abruptly. “Hey. *What?*”

But she was gone.

Somehow, dinner at the local pub wasn’t quite as relaxing as he’d thought it would be. He pushed the last of his salad around the plate, trying to ignore that uneasy prickle in the back of his mind as well as the smell of fish and chips—with Physical Readiness Training season right around the corner, it was all salad and chicken until weigh-ins were done. DMing his friends, he sent out the call:

Which of you assholes set me up on the radio prank with the “Downton Abbey” chick?

Nothing in response but a lot of cheerfully obscene memes, typical navy. He was fishing around for pound notes to pay for his dinner, when his phone lit up: alerts from all his various navy group chats, only this time it wasn't memes.

Holy shit

Jesus Christ

The fucking “Invincible”—they’re saying it just disappeared off the map??????

DMing my buddy Eovaldi, he’s on the “John Paul Jones” in the same area, maybe he heard something . . .

Matt’s empty glass tipped over as he swiped frantically for CNN.com.

US Navy Ship Missing in North Atlantic.

No Contact for over 12 Hours amid Massive Radio and Radar Disruption.

1943

Withernsea

Lily was supposed to be on shift at noon, but she bunked. “Terrible stomachache,” she called to her billet mate through the loo door, making retching noises. “Spewing everywhere. Tell Fiddian I’m at death’s door.” Moan, retch, flush loo, repeat. As soon as the coast was clear, she tiptoed back into their shared room, shot the bolt, and set up the wireless. *Come on, Petty Officer Jackson*, she thought, watching the clock tick agonizingly toward noon.

Just a matter of days since she’d heard his original transmission from the *Colin Powell*. Putting things in place, scrambling, praying she’d thought of everything. Wondering if she’d actually gone mad, cracked up under the strain of too many midnight shifts.

And yesterday that baritone drawl had come through the static, amused and wary and very much alive. Very, very, real. A voice from the *future*.

Come on, you Yank bastard, Lily thought now, staring at the transmitter. *Tune in*. And at two minutes to noon, she heard it. “This is Matthew Jackson, transmitting in the clear, repeat, this is Matthew Jackson, come in any station this net.” Pause. “Lady Rose, you there? Over.”

She snatched up the transmitter, eyes watering with relief. “Petty Officer Lily Baines here. I don’t know where you got this Lady Rose business.”

“It’s on a TV show, it’s—never mind.” His voice was flat, taut, very different from the voice with the audible smile in it that she’d heard yesterday. She heard him key back on before she could ask what in blazes a TV was. “Look, I really need to know this, and for the love of God, please tell me the truth. How did you know about the *Invincible*?”

“Heard it on watch through the headphones.” Lily picked her words carefully. None of this was fit for open transmission; it made her skin crawl, thinking about how many protocols she was breaking. “It’s—it’s 1943 here.”

She waited for him to scoff—he’d had a lot less time to absorb this than she had—but there was only a crackle of static. “Look,” he said at last. “Rationally, I can’t believe any of what you’re telling me. But I get to a hotel I decided to stay at just two hours before I arrived there, and find a dude waiting for me with an eighty-year-old radio and the woman on the other end knows my name, and then the ship disappeared last night just like you said it would. So . . .”

“How many did you lose?” Lily couldn’t help but ask. The latest convoy losses in the newspaper today had been dreadful. The thought of sailors drowning in a welter of dark sea and enemy fire made her flesh crawl regardless of whether it happened in her own century or his.

“No casualties known yet. Right now, we’ve just lost contact, and everything’s spinning up. My leave’s been canceled, and I’m flying out to join the *Colin Powell* tonight instead of in three days.” His voice flattened even further. “So you knew about it. In advance. Which means either you really *are* in 1943, seeing the future—or you’re on the side of whoever is behind this, and you’re running some epically complicated shit on me.”

Lily tried to speak, but he was still transmitting.

“Look, I left the pub last night after hearing the news, and I went deep all night finding you. I managed to dig up a cell number and wake up somebody at Baines & Morrissey, and they said the delivery was legit—set up and paid for in 1943. They all thought it was some kind of elaborate joke, and I’m not sure they’re wrong, but they gave me the name Lily Margaret Baines as the one who paid for it, and if you’re me, you can do a lot with a name. Lily Margaret Baines: eldest daughter of the fifth Viscount

Baines, debutante in 1938, joined the Wrens in 1940. After that, I've got a marriage certificate, a death certificate, photos, so I know a Lily Baines existed—”

He knows when I'm going to die, Lily thought with a shudder that ran the full length of her body. On the other hand, she knew the same about him.

“On the other hand, you could have looked up a real historic person to make this con sound better. So, start talking, Lady Rose. Who told you about the *Invincible*?”

Finally, she was able to transmit. Lily pressed the button, sitting on the edge of her bed. “You,” she said. “Midnight watch a few nights ago, I tune in to hear you say that you're tracking for the area the *Invincible* disappeared on the ninth of March, 2023.” A breath. “And an hour later, I heard you die.”

2023

York

Her words fell into Matt's ears like drops of ice. Dimly he realized he was sitting down on the edge of the bed, rubbing a hand through his hair, listening to a girl in another century tell him how he would die.

“The *Colin Powell* started taking fire,” she said, her voice tinny. He knew that tone; it was the sound of a navy petty officer brutally flattening all the emotion out of their voice to get a job done. He knew it because he'd done it himself. “You were in the area with some kind of fleet, everyone on high alert because of the *Invincible*'s disappearance. I didn't understand it all, what I was hearing, but I *heard* it all—through you. You were cool as a cucumber, right to the end.”

“Wait, how could you hear me at all?” Matt wasn't sure why his brain latched on to that detail when he was hearing about his own goddamn death, but it did. “Ship to ship, we would have been talking on encrypted channels. You shouldn't have been able to listen in.” *From 1943 or anywhere else.*

“You said you were broadcasting in the clear because the usual channels kept getting bursts of disruption. No one was sure why; it had you all nervous . . .” A pause, and then she burst out, “What were you fighting?”

How do I know that, Lady Rose? Matt thought. *According to you, it won't happen to me for another few days.*

“Was it—I can't believe I'm saying this. Was it *vampires*? Because you yelled *Vampire, vampire inbound*—”

Matt squeezed his eyes shut, then open again. His hand was flexing rapidly on his knee, he realized. “It's—it means missiles inbound. Missiles in the air, gunning for you.” The thing you never, ever wanted to hear. The thing he'd never, ever had cause to say in his entire naval career. He'd never seen combat; radio types didn't. You sat in little cold rooms with headphones and tracked things, well behind the lines.

“Missiles . . . ,” Lily said from the other end, sounding bemused. Matt found himself giving a brief explanation of what an anti-ship cruise missile was, in terms a forties-era girl would comprehend. She still sounded dubious as she said, “Well—it makes more sense than actual vampires.”

“You thought we were fighting bloodsucking fiends in black capes?” Matt couldn't help asking with an involuntary laugh.

“I was already listening to a broadcast from the future.” She sounded momentarily waspish. “I was running low on skepticism.”

“Vampires are not real, even in 2023. So far, anyway. Though if you'd put it on my bingo card for 2020, I might have bought it.” JFC, he was not going to try to explain the COVID-19 lockdown to a girl from 1943. She was probably still hearing horror stories about the 1918 pandemic. “Vampires inbound, OK. What happened then?”

“Your ship was hit,” she said simply. “Multiple times. It took forty-two minutes to sink. I heard you till the end. You—you stayed at your post. You couldn't get out; the explosion had warped the door. Locked you in. You kept transmitting till the end, even as water was flooding the compartment and everyone else was screaming and clawing to get out. You sounded so calm. Right till the last moment—you said that one week ago you were in room 202 of the Grand in York, and you wished you'd known that the same night you'd be hearing about the *Invincible*. Because you would have stopped worrying about your upcoming PRT, and got the fish and chips at the pub instead of the salad.”

Matt's entire spine did its best to crawl out of his skin, over his shirt collar, and under the bed.

“Then there was a blare of static, and I thought I heard you scream. But it was cut off. The transmission went dead.”

A ghastly silence stretched, and Matt realized he could imagine her clear as day. This girl whose face he'd found on Google Images, a blurry black-and-white oval over a brass-buttoned uniform. Only she was in living color, with her dark cloud of curls and her crystal-clear *Downton Abbey* voice, sitting on a bed just the way he was, somewhere in *Nineteen Fucking Forty-Three*.

"Matt." Her voice was uneven, rising from its petty officer flatness. "I don't want you to die like that. Please let me help you. Please believe I am who I say I am."

He swallowed. "I'm not allowed to believe you, Lady Rose. I know what my protocols would say."

A long silence, then a crackle of static. For a moment, he thought he'd lost her; then her voice was back. "I am unbreakable. Even when you break me, I remain unbroken. What am I?"

Matt was standing without realizing he'd bolted to his feet. "*What?*"

"The riddle you were telling on the air, right before the ship was hit."

He'd never heard that riddle from anyone else. His dad claimed to have made it up. That didn't mean it wasn't out there somewhere, but—

"What's the answer to the riddle?" Lily Baines asked. "You never said, on the transmission. That was when everything started going to hell in a bally basket."

I am unbreakable. Even when you break me, I remain unbroken. What am I? "Wind," Matt heard himself say. "Kinda gross, also kinda profound. It's the kind of riddle sailors like. My dad was navy too."

Slowly, he sat back down. His ship was going to go down with all hands in the next week. Maybe World War III was about to kick off.

"Holy shit," said Matt Jackson.

The woman from the past just listened, cool as Devonshire cream, saying nothing.

"OK, Baines," he heard himself saying, one petty officer to another. "Tonight, eighteen hundred, I start a journey involving three buses, a plane flight, and a helo ride to the fucking North Atlantic where you and I are going to be out of comms reach. So, in the next six hours, how do we head this thing off?"

1943

Withernsea

o,” Lily said forty minutes later, “I cannot fake a series of documents good enough to fool your superiors, and set up another drop with Uncle Andrew. That is beyond my skills.”

“Dammit Jim, you’re a Y Station listener, not a forger?”

“What?”

“Old TV show. Never mind,” Matt muttered on the other end. Lily glared at him, or at least the transmitter. She wanted to ask about these bizarre references he kept making, but there wasn’t *time*. Five hours and counting . . . she was pacing up and down the room, or at least the few steps and back, which was all the cord would permit. She somehow knew that he was pacing too: she could hear the scrape of shoes, and periodically he stubbed his toes on something and muttered *Goddamn tiny Brit furniture*. She imagined him as one of those tall, lanky Yanks, towheaded, very white teeth. Pacing, probably rubbing a hand through his hair. She’d only been talking to him for a day, and she had no idea what he looked like, but somehow she’d built up a picture anyway.

“Look, could you go to your commanding officer first thing and convince him I’m real?” she asked instead. “Give him the full story, corroborating details.”

“Uh-huh. So I walk in, ‘Oh, good afternoon, sir, ST1 Jackson here. Just a heads-up, I’ve been talking to a Wren from 1943 on this eighty-year-old wireless she sent me, and she knows for a fact that we’re going to be sunk in a few days. Mind talking to the admiral about turning the battle group around?’ Sorry, Lady Rose, I don’t see that going well.”

“You could take the wireless receiver onto the ship.”

“What if I can’t get you on the freq? We’re talking through a *wormhole* or some quantum fluctuation or whatever the hell this is; we’re lucky it’s lasted this long.” Lily imagined him looking out the window of his room at the Grand. She wondered what it looked like—how the skyline of her birth city had changed in nearly a century. “How are we doing this?” he asked finally. “Talking across time.”

“Well . . . because of what you said in your transmission, I only knew one exact point of time where you were going to be—on land, anyway. At the Grand, room 202, the ninth of March. So I thought I’d send the wireless and see if it could, I don’t know, create a link.”

“Which was pretty goddamn genius, Lady Rose. If I’d realized I was listening through a wormhole to someone dying three generations in the

future, I'd have run around in circles screaming, not put together an eighty-year-old go-package in forty-eight hours flat."

"Don't sell yourself short, Petty Officer Jackson. You're pretty cool under fire from everything I heard." She stopped herself before she could choke up. Even in his last moments, the compartment flooding around him, he'd still been trying to transmit. Throwing out information to help any fellow ships who could hear.

Silence expanded through the airwaves.

"I guess what I mean is, how did you hear me to begin with?" he asked quietly. "How did Lily Baines in her little Y Station in Yorkshire pick up my voice eighty years in the future?"

"I've got ears like a bat," Lily offered.

"You're coming in amazingly clear. Eighty years away and I can hear every silver spoon and castle turret in your vowels."

"I didn't grow up in a castle, thank you." She sat on the edge of the bed again. She heard a sigh of bedsprings through the transmitter and knew he was sitting on his. "You're coming in clear too. I've practically got ranch dust and mooing cattle coming through the headphones."

"I'm in *York*, not Wyoming. Besides, not all American boys grow up on ranches, Lady Rose."

"Not all English girls grow up in castles, cowboy."

Another silence.

"Maybe the wormhole or anomaly or whatever came through on my end," he said. "I've heard some chatter about spooky new tech the Russian navy's supposedly got. Some quantum encabulator thing that can break encryptions on the fly, deny spectrum usage, render most of our security inoperable, who knows."

"How?"

"How should I know; I'm not there yet in the timeline. I'd tell you to ask me in a few days, but we'll be out of comms range."

"Let's assume that's it, then." Lily waved a hand magisterially, even though he couldn't see it. "Pin it all on the spooky stuff from the Soviets."

"Russians, actually. Soviets haven't been around for over thirty years now. And it's spooky *shit*, Baines. This is officially a situation where even proper English flowers like you can swear."

"I have never said that word in my life, and I never will. My nanny tanned my backside for letting slip with *bloody awful* when I was ten. And

are you saying the Soviet Union is *gone*?”

“Eh, more like they changed the name on the door. And I’m sorry if I shock you. I’m a sailor; we use the word *fuck* as a comma.”

“Typical Yanks.”

“Hey, your sailors talk like this too, in the twenty-first century.”

“I see the Empire’s standards have slipped shockingly.”

“Yeah, about this Empire business . . .” Lily could hear the smile in his voice, and she returned the smile, flopping on her back across the bed next to the wireless. “You know what,” Matt continued, “never mind. I already let it slip about the USSR dissolving, I can’t risk screwing up the future by telling you too much more.”

“What, the future won’t happen if I know it’s going to?”

“The butterfly effect, Marvel and Loki, and the whole variant-timeline thing. I can see you wrinkling your nose”—Lily was—“but what it comes down to is yeah, we should probably try to avoid timeline paradoxes.”

“Did I set one off by warning you about the *Colin Powell* attack?”

“I don’t know. But you’ve already done it, so we may as well proceed. Can’t really un-ring that particular bell.”

“If you know my future, I’m tempted to ask you if I live to be an old lady. Or whom I marry.”

A creak of springs on his end. She could tell he’d just lain down, probably pillowing his head on his elbow the way she was. “That’s the kind of thing I probably shouldn’t get into.”

“Can you tell me one thing?” She drew in a breath, and found her voice suddenly clogged with tears. Everything in her locked like a fist, and she had to fight to get the words out, sounding so small and lost, she was ashamed of herself. “Do—do we win?”

A hiss of static, and for a heart-stopping moment she thought she’d lost him. “The war?” he asked, sounding startled. “Your war?”

“Yes, of course my war! The war against *Hitler*. Who did you think I meant, the Boers? Bloody Napoleon?” She pressed the heel of her hand to her burning eyes. “Just, tell me . . . Do we win?”

“Lily,” he said slowly. He hadn’t said her name before, just *Baines* or *Lady Rose*. “Why do you think I’m not talking to you in German right now? Yeah, honey. You win. We all do.”

Oh God, Lily thought, and began to cry. She clapped a hand over her mouth, trying to stifle the sounds.

“I’m—look, I’m not going to tell you too much about it, all right? I really, really don’t want to screw up history here. But you win. You do. A lot of it comes down to people like you—listening, decoding, intel. It matters. So, so much more than you think.”

“It does?” She barely managed to keep her words steady over her streaming eyes.

“Yeah.” His voice was like a warm blanket, a hot toddy, an arm around the shoulders. She had a feeling he knew she was crying. “It fucking matters. What I do, our kind, signal technicians—it descends straight from you guys.”

“Our kind?” She tried to say it without sharing the classified parts. “The kind with blasted headphones and little cold rooms?”

“Yeah, them. You. Want to know the first thing I did, coming to England? I went to Bletchley Park. Because it’s *Mecca* to people like us. BP and all the outstations like the one you’re at. The Greatest Generation, all these girls like you sitting in little cold rooms with your headphones on. I saw that display, the Bakelite headphones and wireless receivers and what you managed to do with them, and I felt like I was in goddamn *church*.”

He shouldn’t have said that, Lily thought. The words *Bletchley Park*, ultrasecret Station X itself, going out over an open radio channel? But she let it fly into her heart, and felt something ease there. “The Greatest Generation?” she said, wiping her eyes as she steadied her voice. “Is that supposed to be us? My generation?”

“That’s you.” Pause. “Fuck it all, I could really use a drink.”

“Now, now.” Lily sat up. She wanted to ask him so many more questions, and it probably wasn’t a good idea, so she tried for levity instead. “At least be more creative if you’re going to swear. You couldn’t *really use a drink*; you could really use a chance to get *kippered, bottled, sauced, utterly fizzed*.”

“I’ll start saying *utterly fizzed* the day you say the word *fuck*, Lady Rose.”

“That will never happen, cowboy.”

“I dunno; you said *bloody* just a moment ago. I’m clutching my pearls, let me tell you.”

Lily wiped her puffy eyes again, hearing the tick of the clock. Time, ticking away, time they didn’t have. “Look, let’s go over the whole

transmission again. Everything I heard you say that first night. There has to be something concrete you can take to your commander.”

They were halfway through it again, getting frustrated, when a sharp rapping came on the door. “Baines, open up. Have you got a *man* in there?”

“Oh crumbs,” Lily whispered. Fist-Face Fiddian, on the warpath. “Matt, fifteen minutes. Next frequency on the list. Over and out.” She cut the connection and frantically raked the headphones off. “Just a tic,” she called through the door.

“Have you got a *wireless*?” Fiddian’s suspicious voice called back. “Transmitters are strictly forbidden by rule of—”

“Of course I haven’t got a wireless,” Lily called, shoving it into its case. “Don’t be ridic! Just talking to myself.”

“Open this door, Baines.”

Not on your blinking life, Lily thought. They’d take the wireless and transmitter for certain, and she’d probably land in the brig. What was the brig? Did the navy have brigs in Matt’s day? She bundled the case under one arm as Fiddian continued to shout on the other side, hesitated only a moment, then hauled up the sash of the window and looked down. “Couldn’t I have got a ground-floor room?” she muttered, then sighed, dropped the wireless case into the laurel hedge below as gently as possible, and wriggled herself after it. The promenade with its absurd stone turrets was just a quarter mile away, and there was an isolated corner down at the end, right by the water—she could trot there, set up, and be utterly alone in ten minutes. No one would hear the sound of transmission over the whipping ocean breeze.

We’re going to win the war. The thought kept echoing, a silent, jubilant shout as the Honorable Lily Baines dropped into the laurel hedge, struggled out, moaned briefly at her torn stockings, then hauled the wireless case under one arm and legged it across the garden toward the beach. She hadn’t felt this violently alive in a very long time, torn stockings or no. *We’re going to win the war.*

So let’s stave off the next one, shall we?

2023

York

hose were the longest fourteen minutes of Matt’s life, and considering his life had about one week left to run, fourteen minutes wasn’t an

acceptable loss of time in the current mission scenario. It felt like twenty years, pacing back and forth across his hotel room, before the new frequency crackled to life. He snatched up the transmitter. “Lady Rose?”

“You know, let’s stick with that,” she said, sounding out of breath. “I’d rather not use my birth name when I’m technically broadcasting illegally with a transmitter they can arrest me for not turning in.”

“Don’t tell me where you are, just tell me you can keep talking to me.” Right now, he felt like he’d go completely to pieces if he couldn’t keep her voice in his ears.

“I’m wet; I’m winded; and I’m bally freezing, but I’m here.” Some static, some rustling, and the lump in Matt’s throat eased as she clearly settled into whatever was her new location. He could hear the rustle of wind, what sounded like a seagull’s cry. The girl was running like a damn deer trying to keep him on the airwaves. “Look, I remembered something from your original transmission, at the very end. As your ship was going down, you were putting out as much information as you could for any friendly forces—you were breaking up badly, but I heard something about a timing and coordination signal that kept coming up a minute or so before each disruption that hit the area.”

“The disruptions to our encrypted channels?” Matt sat up straighter.

“Right. You mentioned that just before each disruption hit and played hell with all comms and radars, you picked up this *timing and coordination* thing. Can you—I don’t know, go looking for that in advance?”

Matt was already ahead of her. If he could dig the T/C signal out of the noise floor before the first disruption fired off, maybe he’d have the chance to warn his ship to go Quick Quiet on all radars and comms . . . “You might be on to something, Lady Rose.”

“I don’t think we’ve got anything else, frankly. We’ve been through it all with a fine-tooth comb.”

Matt felt his hand tighten on the transmitter. “What if it’s not enough? What if I can’t dig the T/C out, and my ship goes down and World War Three kicks off?”

“You’ll find it.” Lily’s crystalline voice kept going, steady as a pulse. “I don’t know how. I could describe how *I’d* do it, but your machines are eighty years ahead. But I can find any signal, if I know it’s out there. You can do the same.”

“If they’ve got spooky new tech to hide behind, I might not be able to.” Matt knew he was good. He didn’t know if he was that good. If anyone was. He could feel his heart climbing into his throat.

“No.” Lily’s voice sheared through the choking doubt. “See, they taught us something in Wimbledon.”

“What?” he asked tiredly. “An overhand serve?”

“A listening training course, you arse. Where they taught us that human usage isn’t perfect. There are always mistakes. There are always traces. No matter how good the—the tech is. You just need to listen for them.” A pause, and he could imagine her on her cold wind-whipped beach somewhere, under a pier or huddled in the shadow of a dock, pushing salt-flecked dark curls out of her face. “I’ve got ears like a bat, and so do you.”

“Lily . . .”

“Matt. The enemy’s out there. You’re heading into their teeth, and there’s nothing we can do to stop that. So you find them. Because that’s what we do, *our kind*. Listen hard and dig that signal out. Because I’m not doing my bit to win this war on my end, knowing that it’s all going to hell eighty years down the line.”

He lay down again, clutching the transmitter, fear still choking him. *You can’t put this on me*, he thought, but it wasn’t like she had a choice. Her ears had found *him* through eight decades of frequency static—just him. And she couldn’t help him with it. She had her own war to fight tooth and nail, her own victory to win.

He looked at the tattooed lines on his forearms, and didn’t realize he’d said them aloud until he heard Lily’s “What?”

“‘Of doubt and dark they feed their nerves; the signal moon is zero in their voids.’ Dylan Thomas. I got it tattooed on my forearms when I became an ST. The poem doesn’t really have anything to do with the kind of work we do, but to me those lines do.”

“Chasing the signals through the void,” she answered. “Chasing away doubt and nerves.”

“Yeah.” Matt rubbed his smarting eyes, tattooed lines nearly burning on his skin. “Do me a favor?”

“Anything.” Lily’s voice wasn’t crystal now. It was steel.

“I’ve got three hours before I need to catch my train. Talk to me, Lady Rose. Just talk to me.”

2023

Aboard the USS Colin Powell

Hey, wanna get some chow?” Matt’s supervisor called, but Matt waved him off with a half-eaten Pop-Tart. He was down the rabbit hole, and he wasn’t coming out.

“What’s up with the FNG?” he heard the other STs on the *Colin Powell* asking behind his back—ever since he’d come on board, he’d hardly been out of his headphones long enough to grab a few hours of sleep or a mushy banana for breakfast, much less have a conversation with anyone. He’d gotten permission from his chain of command to stay on station as long as he wanted to, after feeding them some carefully edited bullshit of how he heard there could be some unknown signal operating in the area. It sure as hell didn’t help with him being named the weirdo Fucking New Guy, but they were happy to have someone willing to stand as much watch as possible, given the situation.

But he’d been hunting for days now—the attack that would sink this ship was coming in twelve hours—and he still hadn’t heard a trace of that T/C signal.

He’d heard rumors, sure. Rumors about the still-missing *Invincible*, rumors about the new quantum tech in the Russian fleet running training ops in these same Atlantic waters . . . but for Matt, it all came down to the same old thing. The cold, claustrophobically small room. The long rollers underneath his boots as the *Colin Powell* chopped through stiff northern waters. The blinking glow of screens. The headphones. The stack of mixed energy drinks next to him, half the cans already emptied.

“Chicory coffee for me,” Lily had said on that last call. “Ghastly stuff. Keeps you awake, though.” He could imagine her voice so clearly, she might have been in the seat next to him—but she wasn’t. The seat next to him held another ST whose name he didn’t know, working on the hourly situation report. Something the next twelve hours would render supremely irrelevant.

You can do this, Lily said. He’d told her goodbye five days ago after talking nearly three hours on that wireless. She’d called a halt twice to switch her position, just in case her transmission might be tracked, and they’d been interrupted twice more on the channel by harrumphing British voices telling them to get off the ruddy air—didn’t they know they shouldn’t be transmitting in the open; didn’t they know there was a war on?

—but Lily had planned for that, of course she did; they just gave a quick *over-and-out*, and hooked back up on the next frequency she'd given him on her scrawled list. They'd worked their way three-quarters down that list by the time Matt had to sign off, check out of the Grand, and run for his Uber.

“Go save the ship, cowboy.” Lily's voice had been just a shade too brittle to be as flippant as she sounded. “Go save the world.”

“You too, Lady Rose.”

That had been five days ago. They had a plan for talking again, but that was only if he lived past the next twelve hours.

Me at my desk, Lily, Matt thought, cracking another Rip It and rolling his neck, *and you at yours*. He imagined her slugging some chicory coffee, pulling her coat around that trim brass-buttoned uniform, twiddling the dials on her wireless. Not eighty years in the past, *now*. In some way, in some where, she was doing this *now*, thinking of him just as he was thinking of her. Both of them thinking, to themselves and to each other, *You can do this*.

Matt pulled on his headphones just as she pulled on hers, and the two of them kept hunting.

1943

Withernsea

Check the last frequency on the list, every day at noon.” That had been the agreed-upon plan, but in truth, Lily checked it a lot more often. One month went by as Lily took her various penalties for skipping out on Fiddian the way she'd done; despite the reprimands and the docked leave and the punishment detail, by hook or by crook, she always managed to tune in at noon. On loo breaks from her Y Station shift if she had to, but she checked in at the end of every shift too. And the beginning of shifts . . . and in the middle of the night sometimes as well.

Two months went by. Nothing but static. Maybe Matt was dead; maybe he'd failed. And the kicker was, she wouldn't *know*. She wouldn't know maybe ever, unless she made it to 2023. Matt had seen her obituary; maybe she'd actually live to be that old, but who knew if she'd *remember*? Put her dentures in and dodder over to these computing machines Matt said came out of her war and were so prevalent in his, and check the headlines to see if the USS *Colin Powell* had been sunk with all hands aboard? What if it had

all been for nothing, and she'd just traded claustrophobic terror about this war for claustrophobic terror about another one still to come?

Three months. The Axis forces had surrendered in Tunisia; the North African campaign was over, and everyone was speculating when Sicily would be invaded . . . but no word from Matt.

They hadn't talked about an end date, when she would stop checking. They hadn't dared. They'd just disconnected, Matt trying to hide the dread in his voice, Lily shaking from head to toe. *I'll give it one more month*, Lily thought.

But there came a warm June night, when she'd just tottered off her shift at midnight, getting the room to herself as the tart from Epping tramped downstairs to take over the headphones. Lily hauled the wireless out from under the bed and idly turned the dials, already yawning and poised for bed, only to hear out of the crackle of static: "By—Lady Rose, do you copy? Over."

And the Honorable Lily Baines snatched up the transmitter, and yelped, "*Holy fucking shit!*"

"I must say, Baines," he said, his voice crackling through the static, that warm baritone putting on an atrocious English accent, "I am utterly fizzed to hear your dulcet tones."

Lily clapped a hand to her mouth as tears began to leak from her eyes. And despite the grin in his voice, she was fairly certain her Yank's eyes were leaking too.

She ended up curled on her bed around the wireless, transmitter up to her lips as if she could get closer across the decades. "So, tell me."

"We stopped the attack. It took a couple cycles of disruptions to figure it out. But I dug out the signal. We ran the analysis and realized it for what it was, ran it up to the skipper. Once the *Colin Powell* went Quick Quiet on all radars and comms, we realized that if we powered things down, the disruptions didn't affect us nearly as bad. Once we came back up, we passed word to the rest of the fleet on the Guard."

"En garde?"

A low laugh. "No, not like in fencing. The Guard frequency, international air distress. All countries listen in case planes go down. We put word out as fast as possible so the diplomats could open emergency channels with the Russians and figure out what was going on."

"What was going on?"

“Some bugs in their new tech. The first disruption blast ended up killing all comms on the *Invincible* by mistake—the ship was fine, just no one could find it and they were dead in the water, so we go on high alert and roll out the battle group. And all the Russians see is us bristling. They’re tense; we’re tense; then their tech starts killing comms on our ships, except they’re having the same issues and think it’s *us* attacking . . .” Matt blew a breath out. “Only I found the signal first, so people had time to start talking before any missiles cooked off.”

Lily blinked, hovering somewhere between disbelief and outrage. “You’re saying a shooting war nearly started by *mistake*?”

“They call it a confusion live-fire exchange, and yes, people have actually died that way. Ships have died. But not mine, not this time.” Another hesitation. “Everyone’s still going apeshit trying to figure out these disruptions. They were detected all over, around half the globe. People are saying they got texts from impossible dates; phones went wonky thinking it was 1850 or 1972 . . . It was nuts. That’s why it took months for the *Colin Powell* to put into port so I could finally take leave, hightail it back to York, and call you.”

Lily pillowed her head on her folded elbow. “I’m assuming you’re not at risk”—if he was back on leave in Britain again, there obviously wasn’t any bally state of emergency—“but might there be more attacks?” How cruel of fate if they’d been able to fend off one attack, but others came like knives out of the night and took everything down some different way.

“Unlikely.” There was a shift of springs in the background; Matt was clearly back on some hotel bed again, probably too long for it, feet in their boots hanging off the edge. He was six feet three; he’d told her that at some point—she could no longer remember when. “Everyone’s making all nice now, not admitting to anything. Tensions de-escalating.” A pause, and then he added very low, “You saved us.”

“You did that.”

“No. It was the trickiest thing I’ve ever tracked. No way in hell I’d have dug it out if I didn’t already know it was out there. My whole ship is alive because you told me to keep listening. So—thank you. One petty officer to another.” She could hear the smile in his voice. “If for no other reason, my reputation on the *Powell* right now is pretty goddamn epic.”

“One petty officer to another, you’re welcome.”

Silence stretched before he spoke again. “Funny, isn’t it? We did this monumental thing together, and we can’t ever tell anyone.”

“There’s already so much in this war I won’t ever be able to tell anyone.” The Official Secrets Act had drummed that into Lily’s bones: her parents, her ex-deb friends, her future husband—none of them could know about her work here.

“I know, me too. Most of what I do is classified. Even then, we’ve got people who do the same work as we do, who know the game. I’ve got fellow STs; you’ve got fellow Wrens. But *this* is a whole new level.”

Lily nodded. Maybe someday the period of secrecy would be expired for anything done in 1943; maybe it would be all right to discuss things discreetly. But she wasn’t ever going to talk about this thing with Matt. Or else her children or her grandchildren would think Granny had gone barmy. “Do you think we’ll just—forget, after a while? The brain likes to do that, just put things away and forget them if they don’t make sense.”

“I guarantee I’m not going to forget you, Lady Rose.”

“I don’t think I could forget you either,” she answered quietly.

Another pause, and then he coughed. “So, that’s my war. How’s yours going?”

“Swimmingly.” Convoys were still being targeted, but Lily was finding the grind easier. She still had to push down a clutch of terror for all her friends she might yet lose in this war, but even if she lost some of them, she wouldn’t lose the rest of the world. She could sit in the dismal grays of the night shift and look around at her fellow Wrens in their headphones and think, *Greatest Generation*, smiling at how absurd it sounded, especially when looking at her desk-mate picking her nose. Then she’d go back to work, humming under her breath. She could even regard Fist-Face Fiddian with a smile these days. *You’re part of the Greatest Generation, too, you old bat*. “How long before your leave ends?”

“Five days. I booked ’em all at the Grand in York.”

“Room 202?”

“Wouldn’t take any other. I’ve got a full moon shining through this window right now.”

Lily stretched out an arm to lift the blackout curtain a hair. “Half-moon here. I guess it’s a different moon, even if we’re both in a Yorkshire June.”

“Too bad.” His voice was low. “I wish you could see the moonlight shining into this room, Lady Rose.”

Lily wished that too. She wished she could shimmy into her best violet crepe frock and pearls, and run into the Grand to see him come pelting down the stairs in uniform—she couldn't help but picture blues and gold braid like the boys here had, not these things he called *digi-cams*. Whatever the uniform looked like, she could imagine herself slinging her arm through his, her head just about topping his shoulder, and dragging him out for a night on the town. Whether it was York in her time or York in his, they could surely have found someplace playing Glenn Miller. Matt had told her he could dance: *Swing club in college, I can cut a rug pretty good*. Cutting a rug to “Moonlight Serenade,” his arm around her waist, her hand in his, on a night with a full moon.

But it wasn't going to happen.

“Lily . . .” She heard him take a deep breath. “The disruption effects, whatever they are—they're fading. All over, wherever they popped up. This channel we're talking on, it could cut out anytime.”

“How long do you think we've got?” she managed to ask around the thickness in her throat.

“Minutes? Hours?”

They'd already been on borrowed time, Lily thought. Not even borrowed time—slipped time. Someone had slipped a little of his time into her pocket, and she didn't know how much more they had left.

She curled her head against the wireless. Too metallic and blocky to feel anything like a man's shoulder, but one could pretend. “Do me a favor, cowboy?”

She could hear him turning over on his own bed, springs squeaking again. “Anything.”

“Talk to me, Matt. Just talk to me. Until the signal moon goes zero.”

September 2023

The first time Matt went to Bletchley Park, he did the tourist stuff: wandered the big Victorian mansion, took the tour of the grounds and outbuildings mocked up to look like they would have looked in Lily's day, stood in awe in front of the Alan Turing exhibit. This time he went to the Y Station display, and stood for quite a while in front of the clumsy wireless receiver and Bakelite headphones.

“Now, the Y Station listeners didn't work here at Bletchley Park,” he heard a guide telling a group of tourists. “They worked in outstations all

over Britain—mostly young girls. Without their taking down the Morse and the German ciphered traffic coming over the radio waves, the codebreakers here wouldn't have had anything to decode. If you'll look at the display here . . .”

There were black-and-white photos of Y Station listeners. Matt scanned the faces but didn't see Lily. She'd been photographed a lot in her life: the debutante in white satin and ostrich-feather headdress, the smiling Wren in brass-buttoned uniform (that photo was the screensaver on his phone), the wedding day photograph coming out of the Dorchester Hotel in London, the old woman with white hair who had volunteered at Bletchley Park when it opened as a visitors' center in the nineties . . . He'd gone down the Google Images rabbit hole, after their last conversation broke off with a flat, final hiss of static. They'd been trading terrible jokes—Lily had been telling him what the Nazi said to the other Nazi on the Russian front: “*That cute little Russian girl is giving me the eye!*” “*So why don't you go talk to her?*” “*Because she's eyeing me with—*”

Matt wondered if he'd ever find the rest of the riddle. If he even wanted to.

He gave up on the Y Station display and wandered over to the Codebreakers' Wall. Veterans, families, and Bletchley Park supporters could have names engraved on a brick on that wall; he already knew Lily's family had bought one for her in 2015, five years after she died. He'd dug up an Instagram video of the occasion: a wobbly handheld shot of a brick wall, the young voice of one of her grandchildren burbling, “Gran was just the coolest, I mean, a viscount's daughter who did codebreaking *and* had a Dylan Thomas tattoo on her forearm?”

He'd dropped the phone then and cried. Just fucking *wept*.

He could feel his eyes pricking now as he found the same brick: *Lily Margaret Wright, née Baines*. “Hey, Baines,” he said softly. He'd be damned if he called her by her married name. The Google hunt had turned up her husband too, of course. Good-looking guy, ex-RAF, fifty-two years married. Matt hoped he was a good guy. Matt also kind of wanted to punch his face in.

He'd hoped he'd feel something, looking at Lily's brick. *Closure* sounded stupid, but . . . something? “Maybe I've been hoping this will turn out like a movie,” he said aloud, “and your granddaughter will walk up and

tap me on the shoulder, and she'll look just like you. Played by Lily James in the movie, of course."

But that was even stupider. No granddaughter doppelganger could replace Lily Baines, the voice on the other end of the transmitter. The voice he couldn't find again, no matter how many frequencies he tried on the old wireless.

Matt cuffed at his eyes, then hailed the nearest tour guide. "Sir? How do you buy a brick for the wall?"

"For a veteran, you mean? Do they already have a brick?"

Yes, but Matt wanted to buy another. And he knew what he wanted it to say.

LILY BAINES, 2023

MY SIGNAL MOON

AUTHOR'S NOTE

As the author of *The Rose Code*, I've already written hundreds of pages about the women codebreakers of legendary Bletchley Park—that isolated English country manor where the best and brightest minds in Britain labored during World War II to break the supposedly unbreakable Axis military codes. But *The Rose Code* doesn't cover one key stage in the codebreaking process: the Y Station listeners.

Y Stations were signals-intelligence hot spots. Dotted all over Britain, they were staffed at first by men, but as more and more Englishmen headed to the front lines, recruitment shifted toward young women with good listening skills and if possible, fluent German. These ladies came from all walks of life, spending their war glued to clumsy Bakelite headphones and bulky radio receivers, listening round the clock for scraps of German naval transmissions and blips of Morse code. They wrote down every intercepted enemy communication with frantic speed, and their scribbled transcriptions were bundled off (via teleprinter or motorcycle saddlebags) for decryption. Without the keen-eared women of the Y service, the codebreakers of Bletchley Park would have been out of a job.

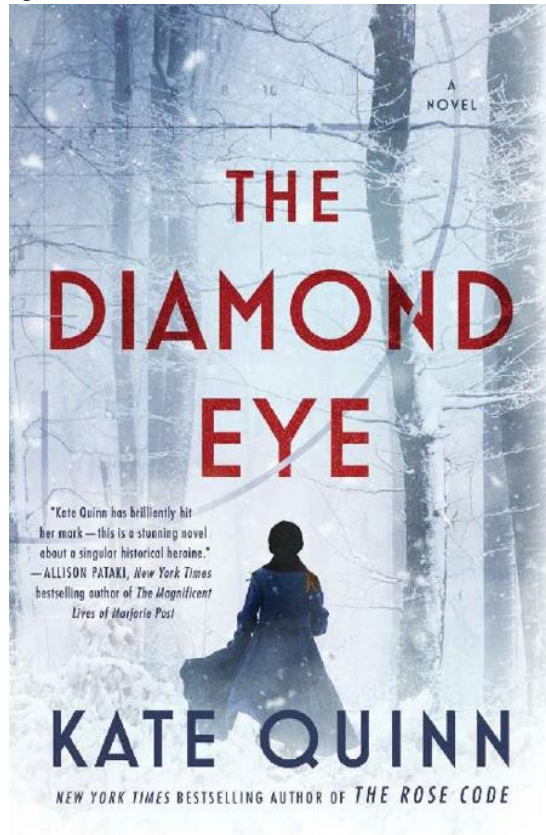
Lily Baines is fictional, but her wartime career is closely based on that of Pat Owtram, a petty officer in the Women's Royal Naval Service who was posted to Withernsea in Yorkshire as a special duties linguist. Like Lily, she was billeted in a requisitioned seaside hotel and intercepted German naval communications across the Baltic and the North Sea, working under the severe Wren Fiddian. Pat's crystal-clear accounts of her work—from the bandwidth where she did her hunting to the procedure of sending messages on to Bletchley Park—are detailed in Tessa Dunlop's splendid book *The Bletchley Girls*. To my knowledge, Pat never intercepted any transmissions from the future . . . that, of course, is my embellishment!

Matt Jackson is fictional, and so is his job—the United States Navy does not have a rate called signals technician. But there are many modern-day servicemen and servicewomen like Matt, who work on ships and in naval listening stations, mostly in little cold rooms full of computers, and their work is directly descended from that done by the Bletchley Park codebreakers. Their official rating isn't classified, but much of their work certainly is, so I fictionalized Matt's rate and left the technical details of his decryption on the also-fictional *Colin Powell* deliberately vague. Many

thanks to my active-duty navy husband, who fine-tuned the military-ese to sound more realistic. He also put me in touch with some naval intelligence colleagues who told me as much as they legally could about the work that they do in those cold little rooms, and honed all the ship-to-ship radio chatter to sound authentic (as well as terrifying—localized conflicts and shooting wars really have started over communication mishaps in the field!).

I've never written anything with a modern-day plot thread, so *Signal Moon* was a fun departure from my usual strictly historical territory. I owe big thanks to independent researcher Kerry Howard, who came to my rescue during the researching of *The Rose Code*, and did so again when I was digging for details about Y Station listeners. And of course, I owe the biggest thanks of all to the men and women who labored during World War II, and those who continue to labor today, in the little-known, high-stress, high-stakes world of signals intelligence. Then and now, they change the world.

More from Kate Quinn



AN INSTANT *NEW YORK TIMES* BESTSELLER!

The author of *The Rose Code* returns with an unforgettable WWII tale of a quiet bookworm who becomes history's deadliest female sniper...based on a true story.

In 1937 in the snowbound city of Kiev (now known as Kyiv), wry and bookish history student Mila Pavlichenko organizes her life around her library job and her young son—but Hitler's invasion of Ukraine and Russia sends her on a different path. Given a rifle and sent to join the fight, Mila must forge herself from studious girl to deadly sniper—a lethal hunter of Nazis known as Lady Death. When news of her three hundredth kill makes her a national heroine, Mila finds herself torn from the bloody battlefields of the eastern front and sent to America on a goodwill tour.

Still reeling from war wounds and devastated by loss, Mila finds herself isolated and lonely in the glittering world of Washington, DC—until an unexpected friendship with First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt and an even more unexpected connection with a silent fellow sniper offer the possibility of happiness. But when an old enemy from Mila's past joins forces with a

deadly new foe lurking in the shadows, Lady Death finds herself battling her own demons and enemy bullets in the deadliest duel of her life.

Based on a true story, *The Diamond Eye* is a haunting novel of heroism born of desperation, of a mother who became a soldier, of a woman who found her place in the world and changed the course of history forever.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Photo © Laura Jucha Photography

Kate Quinn is the *New York Times* and *USA Today* bestselling author of many historical novels, including *The Diamond Eye*, *The Rose Code*, *The Alice Network*, and *The Huntress*. A native of Southern California, she received her bachelor's and master's degrees in classical voice from Boston University before turning her focus to writing fiction. Her books have been translated into multiple languages, and *The Alice Network* was featured as a Reese Witherspoon Book Club pick. Quinn lives in San Diego with her husband and three adorable rescue dogs. You can follow her newsletter, blog, and social media at www.katequinnauthor.com.