

 HEROINES OF WWII 

**THE  
CRYPTOGRAPHER'S  
DILEMMA**

**JOHNNIE ALEXANDER**

  
BARBOUR  
PUBLISHING

*The Cryptographer's Dilemma* ©2021 by Johnnie Alexander

Print ISBN 1-978-1-64352-951-6

eBook Editions:

Adobe Digital Edition (.epub) 1-978-1-64352-953-0

Kindle and MobiPocket Edition (.prc) 1-978-1-64352-952-3

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means without written permission of the publisher.

All scripture quotations, unless otherwise noted, are taken from the King James Version of the Bible.

This book is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are either products of the author's imagination or used fictitiously. Any similarity to actual people, organizations, and/or events is purely coincidental.

Cover Photo © Richard Jenkins Photography

Published by Barbour Publishing, Inc., 1810 Barbour Drive, Uhrichsville, Ohio 44683,  
[www.barbourbooks.com](http://www.barbourbooks.com)

*Our mission is to inspire the world with the life-changing message of the Bible.*



Printed in the United States of America.

## DEDICATION

For Tamela Hancock Murray—  
the treasured answer to a fervent prayer.

*Can any hide himself in secret places that I shall not see him?  
saith the LORD. Do not I fill heaven and earth? saith the LORD.*

JEREMIAH 23:24

## ≡ CHAPTER ONE ≡

*Washington, DC*  
*July 1942*

*Green or brown. Brown or green.*

Phillip Clayton set the unwrapped crayon upright on the diner's Formica tabletop so it stood like a mocking sentinel. He could stare at it until the war was won or lost, and his 50 percent chance of guessing its color wouldn't change. He flicked the offensive object onto the pile of wrappings he'd torn from each crayon in the box.

The bell over the diner's door jingled. Phillip raised his eyes without lifting his head to assess the newcomer—a suit-wearing, middle-aged man with a misshapen fedora—the furtive maneuver more from habit than a professional interest in who entered the door at the far end of the long diner.

The renovated aluminum travel trailer sported booths beneath a row of windows that were separated from the stool-lined counter by a narrow aisle. Located on an out-of-the-way side street, the greasy spoon mostly attracted working stiffs like Phillip who were stuck on the home front while their buddies fought overseas to avenge the dead and wounded of Pearl Harbor.

Phillip's gut clenched as he plucked a different crayon from the pile that resembled a stack of jumbled pick-up sticks. The pristine white one. That color he knew.

He couldn't explain what prompted him to stop in the five-and-dime to buy the box or why he'd come in here, dumped the crayons on the table, and removed the wrappings. Maybe he expected the childish impulse to somehow offset the burn of the letter stuffed in the inner pocket of his suit jacket. If so, he'd sadly miscalculated. His thumbnail dug into the crayon's waxy surface. Then, with little effort, he snapped

it in two with one hand.

The bell over the door rang again, and Phillip inwardly groaned. His uncle, impeccably dressed as usual in a three-piece gray suit complemented with a slender gray tie, appeared as cool as an icebox cucumber despite the sweltering July heat. Richard Whitmer acknowledged Phillip with a dip of his chin then maneuvered his way along the aisle.

Phillip quickly shoved the crayons back into the box and swept the torn wrappings toward the napkin dispenser situated beneath the window.

Richard settled in the opposite bench and steepled his fingers. "Should I have brought coloring books?"

"How did you know I was here?" Annoyed at the petulant tone in his voice, Phillip deliberately lightened it. "Or is this just a coincidence?"

"I've taught you better."

Phillip let a wry smile stretch his lips. "A coincidence is never a coincidence."

"Exactly. Though perhaps this instance is an exception to the rule. I was on my way to headquarters when, lo and behold, who should I see out the window but my own dear nephew trudging down this street. I suppose that could have been mere chance."

"'Trudging?'" Phillip didn't *trudge*. He strode. Sprinted. Raced.

Richard tapped the crayon box. "Is this an indication of bad news?"

The waitress, wearing a pale pink uniform and a frilly cap, appeared at the booth carrying a carafe. "Coffee?"

"Thank you, Irene." Richard directed a smile her way. "Have you heard from Michael recently?"

"I received a letter last week." She set a cup onto a saucer then filled it with the strong brew. "I have no idea where he is, but he says he's fine and he got the package I sent him. That's a blessing."

"Especially if your special oatmeal raisin cookies were inside," Richard said. "I don't suppose you have one or two of those hidden away behind the counter?"

Irene flushed at the compliment. "If I'd known you were dropping by, I'd have baked you a dozen."

"Maybe next time then."

"How about you, hon?" Irene gestured toward Phillip's untouched cup. "Would you like me to freshen that up for you?"

"I'm fine." Phillip forced a smile. As much as he wanted to lash out at the world, he couldn't blame Irene because her son passed his physical with flying colors. Or that Michael's youthful heroism led him to sign up with the army in the days following the Japanese attack. The kid should have graduated from high school a few weeks ago. Instead, he was only God knew where doing his patriotic duty. Phillip had never met the boy, but Irene had been a fixture at the diner for years. As regulars, Phillip and his uncle had heard numerous stories about her only child.

Her gaze shifted from Phillip to the crayon wrappings and then back again. "I'll leave you alone then. Let me know if you need anything."

After she was out of earshot, Phillip said, "Seems like someone at this table could find out where Michael is stationed. And that someone isn't me."

"A phone call or two would suffice." Richard lifted one shoulder. "But it's not my place."

"I suppose not." His uncle was right, of course. He might set Irene's mind at rest for a time, but she wasn't the only mother concerned about her son's whereabouts and if he was getting enough sleep or enough to eat. Sometimes it seemed every woman Phillip knew carried worry around her shoulders like an iron collar. Most of the men too. Yet here he was, still stateside, because his work was considered essential. And because of this ridiculous issue with his eyes.

Phillip ran the edge of his thumb along his eyebrow, an old and unbreakable habit that somehow eased the saying of difficult words. "My appeal was denied."

As Richard poured cream in his cup, the black coffee lightened to brown. *Not green*. A tidbit of knowledge Phillip had somehow picked up over the years but not a fact he could verify with his own eyes.

"Thus, the great crayon massacre."

Despite his deep disappointment, Phillip couldn't help a clipped laugh at his uncle's quip. At least Richard was too diplomatic to say *I told you so*. He'd warned Phillip of this likely outcome.

Richard blew into the cup then took a slow sip. "I hope this means we get to keep you."

"Flying a P51 Mustang isn't my only option." Just the one he'd dreamed about, imagining himself circling and swooping high above the earth during an aerial combat. "I can't stay out of this fight like

a weak-kneed coward.”

“I would argue that highly trained agents of the Federal Bureau of Investigation are neither weak nor cowardly. Not all battles occur in Europe and Asia.”

“The important ones do. The ones that matter do.” Phillip left unsaid that it wasn’t only Irene’s teenaged boy who had volunteered to face the enemy. So had Phillip’s cousins—Richard’s only two sons who had joined the air force and trained to be pilots. So had Phillip’s childhood friends, his closest chums. He was the only one still at home. The only one left behind.

“I assume you’ve considered other options,” Richard said.

“You know me. Always a plan B.” Flip a coin. Heads, army. Tails, navy. What did it matter when he could never join his cousins to fight the enemy in the clouds?

“I won’t insult you by listing reasons this setback may be for the best,” Richard said. “Neither will I put undue influence on you to stay the current course.”

Phillip’s antennae went on full alert at his uncle’s tone. “But. . . ?”

A slow smile crossed Richard’s face. “Your country needs you.” He leaned forward and lowered his voice. “I need you.”

Phillip mirrored his uncle’s posture then cupped his hands around his mug and stage-whispered, “Did Hoover misplace his secret decoder ring? Did Roosevelt lose the map of the secret tunnel out of the White House?”

“Nothing that drastic. Yet a matter has arisen that may be vital to national security.”

“And we’re discussing it here?” Phillip waved his hand to encompass the diner’s interior. At this time of the day, the customers were few. But his uncle’s reputation as a stickler for protocol was well-earned and dogma by even the lowliest staffer at the agency.

Richard straightened, his eyes soft and his voice warm with affection. “Will you leave a tip for Irene? Or should I?”

As Phillip held his uncle’s gaze, the resentment that had weighed upon him since he’d opened the denial letter seemed to ease. Not by much but enough to temporarily shove aside his self-pity.

He placed money on the table and followed his uncle out of the diner.

## ≡ CHAPTER TWO ≡

Even though the random letters were in static blocks—five rows of five each—they danced before Eloise Marshall’s eyes in a staccato rhythm. The individual letters advanced, then receded, in a pattern of their own choosing that the cryptographer couldn’t explain. Not that she needed to. Her work spoke for itself.

The tempo of the dance changed as repeated letters took precedence over the others. With her focus on the coded message and barely aware of her actions, Eloise tapped the eraser end of a pencil on her desk and whispered the order of frequency for single letters, “E T O A N . . .”

Her voice trailed as the most common letters found in the first grid seemingly transformed before her eyes into possible substitutions.

She switched to the frequency of doubled letters and digraphs, still tapping the beat only she could hear with her pencil. “S S, E E, T T . . . T H, E R, O N, A N, R E . . .”

More of the dancing letters seemed to uncloak themselves enough for Eloise to pencil in the possibilities on a sheet of paper with the alphabet printed across the top. She meticulously wrote possible answers beneath the more common letters used in the grid. An *E* beneath a *J*. A *T* beneath a *Q*.

There was no consistency to the code, but it didn’t matter. After surmising several of the substitutions, Eloise switched to a decoding sheet, similar to graph paper but with larger boxes. First, she outlined five-by-five grids and used her preliminary alphabet key to fill in as many individual boxes as she could.

Next, she considered the trigraphs. “The, and, tha, ent, ion. . .” She focused on where these letter combinations appeared together, trying

out possible substitutions for the remaining blank boxes and adding more answers to her alphabet key.

Each success boosted her spirits, giving her the same satisfaction as completing a complicated crossword puzzle or mastering a Bach fugue. Deciphering the codes, especially the more complex ones, could be tedious. But the more difficult they were, the more joy she experienced in successfully decoding them.

This one, however, was fairly routine. Caught up in her work, Eloise didn't realize her supervisor hovered nearby until he cleared his throat. She glanced up at the grim, bespectacled man with his pursed lips and prominent Adam's apple, rubbing her aching neck as she did so. Some of the girls called him Mr. Twitchy Twig behind his back. An apt description though not a kind one.

"Good morning, sir." Expecting he wanted an update on her work, she continued, "I'm making progress, but it'll be a bit longer before I'm done."

"No matter." He gathered her papers into a neat pile and placed them in a folder. "Your presence is requested. Upstairs."

*Upstairs?* She'd never been summoned to that hallowed place before, and she couldn't think of a reason for receiving a summons now.

"Are you sure they asked for me?" Eloise hated the involuntary squeak in her voice. She could control her vocal cords through an entire octave but never when her nerves took over. As they were doing right now.

"Unless there's another Miss Eloise Marshall in this department of whom I am completely unaware." He bent slightly at the waist though he still managed to keep his shoulders and head in perfect alignment. "Go with courage. I assure you there could be no complaints regarding your work here. Or any doubt about your abilities."

*A compliment from Mr. Twitchy Twig?* Another shock to absorb.

He tucked the folder under his arm. "Now go. They're expecting you."

Eloise smoothed her skirt as she stood. "Who exactly are 'they'?"

"As if any of us know." He gestured toward the door. "An escort is waiting for you in the hall."

At least that answered the question of exactly where to go. Grinning to herself at the mental image of figuratively girding her loins, she

marched toward the hallway door as if her insides weren't a mass of lime gelatin and her knees made of rubbery goop.

In the hallway, an older woman wearing a trim jacket over a slender skirt greeted her with a gracious smile. "I'm Lisa Archer, Commander Jessup's secretary. Please come with me."

Eloise rubbed her bare arms. Like most of the other girls in the code-breaking unit, she wore a simple short-sleeved dress and bobby socks. A more professional style wasn't expected of the cryptographers who worked in the lower-level warrens. Thankfully so, since the women didn't earn enough money for a more upscale wardrobe. Besides, the area was almost unbearably hot. The few fans placed around the large rooms were adjusted to avoid blowing papers off the desks. A gal had to stand in front of one to get much comfort.

As she followed Mrs. Archer to the elevator, Eloise admired the quality of her outfit while shoving aside the feelings of inferiority, which, despite her accomplishments, often overpowered her. Not even being recruited to the secretive position of a naval code breaker had bolstered her feelings of inadequacy. Apparently, some wounds never closed.

They stepped into the elevator, and Eloise wrapped her arms around her stomach in preparation for the upward lurch.

"I don't like it either." Mrs. Archer gave a gentle laugh. "But we don't have time to take the stairs."

Her kind demeanor momentarily eased Eloise's nerves. "Do you know why Commander Jessup wants to see me?"

"That's not a question I can answer. But the commander respects skill, aptitude, and a strong work ethic. From what I understand, you excel at all three."

Eloise's cheeks warmed. "I've never met him. That's very kind."

Mrs. Archer merely smiled but said no more during the short upward ride.

The elevator door slid open to a well-lit, carpeted corridor. The walls were a pale yellow, a stark contrast to the institutional green found in the basement. The two women made their way to a large anteroom lined with filing cabinets. Several women sat at typewriters, busily pounding the circular keys.

"This way." Mrs. Archer gestured toward a short hallway. They

entered an outer office of paneled wood containing two desks and a seating area. "Wait here. I'll let the commander know you've arrived."

Eloise perched on the edge of a padded chair while Mrs. Archer rapped on the inner door then disappeared inside. Framed prints of Presidents Washington and Lincoln hung side by side on the opposite wall. Men who'd faced their own wartime challenges. Similar and yet so unlike what the United States was facing now. At least this time, the battles were being fought far away in places Eloise hadn't heard of before she joined the code-breaking unit. Places like Guam, Bataan, and the Coral Sea. Plus so many more.

The inner door opened, and Mrs. Archer beckoned. Eloise took a deep breath as she stood. "You'll be fine," Mrs. Archer whispered as Eloise passed by her. "He doesn't bite."

Eloise swallowed a giggle then entered the room. An imposing figure in navy dress whites stood statue-straight in front of his desk.

"Miss Marshall. Welcome."

Eloise didn't know whether to extend her hand or salute. Maybe a curtsy? The vivid image almost brought on another giggle. She opted for keeping her hands at her side. "Sir."

He gestured toward his left, where two men stood in front of a large pull-down map, their expressions impassive.

"I'd like you to meet Richard Whitmer and his nephew, Phillip Clayton," Commander Jessup said. "They are with the Federal Bureau of Investigation. Shall we all take a seat?"

When they were seated across from him, Commander Jessup lifted a folder from a stack on his desk. "We've been reviewing your file, Miss Marshall. You're doing tremendous work."

Eloise folded her hands in her lap. "I appreciate that, sir."

"So tremendous that Mr. Whitmer believes your skills may be of value to the Bureau."

Eloise darted a glance toward Mr. Whitmer. His warm smile seemed meant to reassure her. Despite her doubts she had anything to offer such a mysterious organization, she responded with a smile of her own. "I suppose I could try."

"I am confident you can do much more than that." Mr. Whitmer gave her an appraising look, dispassionate yet piercing, as if he could assess her character with as much ease as he could evaluate her

appearance. "Your family. What do they think of the work you're doing for the navy?"

"There's only my mother," Eloise admitted, tamping down thoughts of her father and only brother. "She believes I sharpen pencils and fetch coffee."

"She's unaware of your talent for decoding complicated messages?" Mr. Whitmer asked. "That must be a hard secret to keep."

"I signed a secrecy oath, sir."

"We call that a redirect." The nephew, Phillip, spoke for the first time. Neither his expression nor his tone was as affable as his uncle's.

"A what?"

"We know you signed the oath. But you didn't actually answer the question."

"No." She held Phillip's stony gaze while lifting her chin. "My mother is not aware of my talent for decoding complicated messages."

Phillip's expression didn't change, but Mr. Whitmer laughed. "She's perfect." He shifted his attention to Commander Jessup. "Will you approve her transfer to my investigative team?"

The commander turned to Eloise. "It's your decision, Miss Marshall."

*A transfer?* She glanced from the commander to Mr. Whitmer. *To the FBI?* She hadn't known what to expect when she entered the office, but if she'd made a list of possibilities, the FBI would not have been on it. "Will I still be breaking codes?"

"In part," Mr. Whitmer replied. "The assignment involves more than cryptography. I can't provide additional details unless you agree to the transfer."

"Are you a risk-taker?" Phillip asked, a hint of a challenge in his voice.

"Obviously." Eloise matched his tone. "I moved here from Massachusetts all by myself with no idea what I'd be doing once I got here. All I had was an address and the promise of an opportunity to serve my country." She gave him a brief up-and-down look, noting the wrinkles in his pants and the scuff marks on his shoes. "What risks have you taken?"

His eyebrow rose, as if he were taken aback by her assertiveness. Then his expression seemed to relax for the first time since she'd entered the room.

“She reminds me of Debbie,” he said to his uncle. “Same spunk.”

Eloise bit the inside of her lip to keep herself from asking who Debbie was. Even if they told her, she wouldn't know if the resemblance was a compliment or an insult. Besides, she had the sense Phillip wanted her to ask, and she wasn't in the mood to give him the satisfaction.

“I agree,” Mr. Whitmer said, his smile even broader than before. “Are you willing to take another risk, Miss Marshall? Perhaps more than one?”

Eloise hesitated, quickly evaluating the strange situation. If she walked away, she'd never know what she missed. That thought left her empty and lost. Any risk was worth satisfying her curiosity of what the FBI wanted from her.

The same sense of excitement, of independence, that had gripped her when she received the secretive offer to come to Washington gripped her again. Adrenaline boosted her heart rate, and the future seemed to beckon with a promise of breathtaking adventure.

She could only give one answer.

## ≡ CHAPTER THREE ≡

Taking her cue from Lisa Archer's appearance the day before, Eloise dressed in her nicest suit for her morning appointment with Richard Whitmer and his nephew. She studied her reflection then frowned at a small stain on her lapel. Where had that come from?

She'd last worn the outfit, a blue skirt with matching jacket, when she traveled by bus to DC. A glance at her watch told her that she didn't have time to change. If she were late to this meeting, Mr. Whitmer might lessen his seemingly high opinion of her. At least, he'd seemed impressed yesterday when she met him in Commander Jessup's office. Definitely more impressed than his nephew had been. That young man had a chip on his shoulder just begging to be knocked off. What a coup if she were the one to do exactly that!

Phillip had been polite enough. She couldn't fault him for his manners, but his thoughts often seemed to be at a distance from the conversation. When she accepted the assignment, he tried to hide his lack of enthusiasm behind a too-charming smile.

No doubt he was one of those exhausting men who believed the only suitable job for a woman was as a teacher, nurse, or secretary. But the war that took away the men also prompted the women to step out of their traditional roles.

Phillip's views on such changes didn't matter to Eloise. She would wipe that fake smile from his face by proving her value to Mr. Whitmer's investigative team.

But she couldn't make a good impression if she were late. She frowned again at her reflection then brightened. A brooch would do the trick. She rummaged through her small collection of costume jewelry

and found a golden pin that would hide the offensive spot.

She turned one way in front of the mirror then the other, especially satisfied with the jaunty angle of her ivory cloche. Her eyes shone with the excitement of a new experience. Somewhere a grandfather clock boomed the quarter hour. Eloise grabbed her handbag and fled down the stairs of the Francis Scott Key Book Shop, where she and a few other women code breakers rented rooms behind the store, to catch a cab.

She arrived at FBI headquarters with five minutes to spare. She took a deep breath, smoothed her skirt, and assured herself one more time that the brooch hid the stain on her lapel. Perfectly poised with a smile on her face, she started to enter the room where she was to meet Mr. Whitmer. But the sound of her name stopped her near the doorway.

"I can do whatever needs to be done," the voice continued. Phillip Clayton's voice. "Whatever this assignment is, I don't need anyone's help."

"You can't break codes." Richard Whitmer's soothing voice was softer. Eloise leaned closer to the doorframe to hear what he had to say. "Besides, I strongly believe that this specific mission requires a woman's touch."

"Why don't you let me be the judge of that?" Phillip's tone hit a respectful medium between arguing and pleading. "Tell me what I'm supposed to be investigating."

"I'll tell you and Miss Marshall both. As soon as she gets here."

Though Eloise couldn't see either man, she envisioned the frown on Mr. Whitmer's face, his glance at the door. She entered the room, shoulders back, chin lifted high. Phillip might not want her on this mission or investigation or whatever it was, but her role must be important, or she would never have been chosen.

*Men!*

"I'm here," she announced, managing to keep her voice from wavering. She focused her gaze on Mr. Whitmer. "And ready to get started, sir."

"Good." Mr. Whitmer moved toward her and clasped her hand in his. "I was just telling my nephew that this particular assignment required a woman's touch. I am delighted you agreed to join us."

The tension in Eloise's shoulders eased at the warmth of his greeting. She responded to his gracious smile with one of her own. "I want to do whatever I can for the war effort. Thank you for your faith in my abilities."

Try as she might, she couldn't help throwing a triumphant gleam in Phillip's direction. He was perched on the edge of a table in the small room, his expression impassive and his eyes unreadable. Excellent qualities for an FBI agent, she supposed. But not so wonderful for an investigative partner. Hopefully, his prejudice against her wouldn't hinder their mission.

As she stared at him, he slowly stood and joined his uncle. "You heard what I said." His tone was direct but not accusatory. Nor apologetic. "Didn't you?"

Eloise chose to be similarly straightforward. "I did."

"It's nothing personal." His lips curved in a slight, self-deprecating smile. "I prefer to work alone, that's all."

"Why is that?"

A strange noise emanated from Mr. Whitmer's throat, a combination of a gasp and a chuckle that he quickly turned into a cough. Was he horrified by her audacity? Or amused?

"Excuse me?" Phillip stared at her, the smile fading. Eloise's cheeks burned, but she stiffened her shoulders again. She refused to be intimidated by his glare. "I don't have to explain myself to you."

As much as she wanted him to see her value, she didn't want to get off on the wrong foot. His uncle wanted them to be partners, so whether he liked it or not, they needed to work together.

"Of course you don't," she said. "But I trust you will give me a chance to prove myself. Especially when you know little about my abilities."

"Well said, my dear." Mr. Whitmer propelled her toward the table and pulled out a chair. "Phillip isn't as crotchety as he'd like you to believe. He'd rather be on his way to a different type of service, you understand, but here he is, at my request, ready to investigate a puzzling mystery. I can always count on him, and I believe you will come to count on him too."

As Eloise took her seat, he lowered his voice to a stage whisper. "I confess he's my favorite nephew. And he's grown into a fine agent. Though when he and my sons were boys, they got into their fair share

of trouble. The stories I could tell you.”

“No stories,” Phillip said firmly as he took a seat across from Eloise. “And I didn’t get into that much trouble.”

“He’s not good at taking criticism either.” Mr. Whitmer winked at Eloise then took his place at the head of the table.

“Could we please stop talking about my faults?” Phillip tapped the folders stacked in front of his uncle. “We have more important matters to discuss.”

“I simply want Miss Marshall to know what to expect from your partnership.”

“Okay, then.” Phillip shifted his gaze from his uncle to Eloise. “I’d like Miss Marshall to know that I know a great deal about her abilities. That I spent last night reading her dossier, and she may be surprised to learn that I am most impressed with her accomplishments.”

“What does that mean, you read my dossier?” Eloise suddenly felt exposed. She folded her arms across her body as if to protect herself from prying eyes. “What’s in my dossier?”

“It’s what the agency knows about you,” Mr. Whitmer replied. “Your biographical information, your college transcripts, the navy’s personnel records regarding your cryptography work.”

The college transcripts and personnel records didn’t concern her. She graduated magna cum laude from Wellesley College with a bachelor’s degree in mathematics and a minor in music. Her personnel reviews were exemplary. But what about the biographical information? Did that mean the basic data of her existence? Name, date of birth, gender, daughter of Leonard and Sylvia Marshall? Or did the dossier delve into the deeply personal?

She wanted to ask the questions burning a hole in her spirit, but she couldn’t form the words. Did the FBI know about her brother’s death at Pearl Harbor? Of course they did. What about her father? What did the FBI—what did Phillip—know about him?

Anger roiled in the depths of her stomach.

“What about his dossier?” She pointed at Phillip. “When do I get to read about him?”

“You can’t,” Phillip retorted.

Mr. Whitmer pulled a thin folder from the stack and slid it toward Eloise. “It’s heavily redacted, of course. You don’t have the security

clearance to know about his previous operations.”

“Wait a minute.” Phillip reached for the folder, but Eloise snatched it out of his reach.

“Turnabout is fair play,” Mr. Whitmer said. “But you’ll have to read it another time, Miss Marshall. We have work to do.”

Eloise placed the folder, along with her handbag, on the empty chair next to her. She couldn’t help flashing a triumphant smile at Phillip, who scowled and looked away.

“I’m ready,” she said to Mr. Whitmer with a pert smile.

But was she really? Or had it been a mistake to leave the safe, underground world of ciphers and codes? A place where mathematics and transposed letters were priorities and so-called biographical information didn’t matter.

She was about to find out.