

Half Title Page

The Rose Code

Prologue

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NOVEMBER 8, 1947

London

The enigma arrived in the afternoon post, sealed, smudged, and devastating.

Osla Kendall stood, twenty-six years old, dark-haired, dimpled, and scowling, in the middle of a tiny Knightsbridge flat that looked as if it had been bombed by Junkers, wearing nothing but a French lace slip and a bad mood as she looked over the piles of silk and satin exploding over every surface. *Twelve Days Until The Wedding of the Century!* this morning's *Tatler* had gushed. Osla worked for the *Tatler*; she'd had to write the whole ghastly column. *What are YOU going to wear?*

Osla picked up a rose satin gown with whorls of crystal beading. "What about you?" she asked it. "Do you say 'I look simply smashing and I couldn't care less that he's marrying someone else'?" What on earth did you wear to a wedding when you wanted your appearance to say 'I can't outshine the beastly bride but I'd really, really like to'? Etiquette lessons at finishing school never touched *that* one. Whatever the outfit, everyone in the congregation would know that before the bride came along, Osla and the bridegroom were—

A knock sounded. Osla flung on a robe to answer it. Her flat was tiny, all she could afford on her *Tatler* salary if she wanted to live alone *and* be close to the center of things. "Darling, no maid? No doorman?" Her mother had been appalled. "Move in with me until you

find a husband. You don't need a *job*." But after sharing bedrooms with billet mates all through the war, Osla would have lived in a boot cupboard as long as she could call it her own.

"Post's come, Miss Kendall." The landlady's spotty daughter greeted her at the door, eyes going at once to the rose gown slung over Osla's arm. "Oooh, are you wearing that to the royal wedding? You look scrummy in pink!"

It's not enough to look scrummy, Osla thought, taking her bundle of letters. I want to outshine a princess, an actual born-to-the-tiara princess, and the fact is, I can't.

"Stop that," she told herself as soon as she'd shut the door on the landlady's daughter. "Do *not* fall in the dismals, Osla Kendall." All over Britain, women were planning what they'd wear for the most festive occasion since V-E Day. Londoners would queue for hours to see the flower-decked wedding carriages roll past—and Osla had an invitation to the Abbey itself. If she wasn't grateful for that, she'd be just like those ghastly Mayfair moaners blithering on about how *tiresome* it was attending the social event of the century; what a *bother* getting the diamonds out of the bank, oh, woe is me to be so tediously *privileged*.

"It'll be topping," Osla said through gritted teeth, coming back to her bedroom and chucking the rose dress over a lamp. "Simply topping." Seeing London swanning about in banners and confetti, wedding fever whisking away November chill and post-war gloom...the fairy-tale union of Princess Elizabeth Alexandra Mary and her handsome Lieutenant Philip Mountbatten (formerly Prince Philip of Greece) would mark the dawn of a new age, hopefully one where ration laws were finally swatted down and you could slather all the butter you wanted on your scones. Osla was all in favor of ushering this new era in with a slap-up celebration—after all, she'd achieved her own fairy-tale ending by any woman's standards. An honorable term of service during the war, even if she could never, ever, *ever* talk about it; a flat in Knightsbridge paid for by her own salary; a wardrobe crammed with gowns all in the latest go; a job writing entertaining fluff for the *Tatler*. And a fiancé who had put a sparkling emerald on her finger, don't forget him. No, Osla Kendall had no excuse to get in a blue funk. All the business with Philip had been years ago, after all.

But if she could have cooked up an excuse to get out of London—found some way to be geographically elsewhere (the Sahara desert, the wastes of the North pole, *anywhere*)—during the moment Philip bent his golden head and made his vows to England’s future queen, Osla would have taken it in a jiff.

Ruffling a hand through disordered dark curls, she flipped through the post. Invitations, bills, more invitations...and one square, smudged envelope. No letter inside, just a torn sheet of paper with a block of scribbled nonsense letters.

The world tilted for a moment, and Osla was back: the smell of coke stoves and wet wool jumpers instead of furniture polish and tissue paper; the scratch of pencils rather than the hoot of London traffic. *What does Klappenschrank mean, Os? Who’s got their German dictionary?*

Osla shook herself out of the past with a blink. She didn’t bother to think who sent the paper—the old pathways in her mind fired up without a hitch, the ones that said firmly *Don’t ask questions, just get on with it*. She was already running her fingers along the square of scribbled letters. The memory took a while to sort itself from her brain, and when it did the world tilted again.

Vigenere cipher, a woman’s soft voice was explaining. *Here’s how to crack it using a key. Though it can be done without...*

“Not by me,” Osla muttered. She hadn’t been one of the boffins who could crack ciphers with a pencil stub and a little sideways thinking.

The envelope bore a postmark she didn’t recognize. No signature. No address. The letters of the cipher message were so hastily slashed, it could have been anyone’s handwriting. But Osla turned the paper scrap over and saw a letterhead block, as though the page had been torn from an official pad.

CLOCKWELL SANITARIUM

“No,” Osla whispered, “no—” but she was already fishing a pencil stub from the nearest drawer. Another memory, a laughing voice intoning *These have knelled your fall and ruin, but your ears were far away—English lassies rustling paper through the sodden Bletchley day!*

Osla knew what the message’s key would be: LASSIES.

She bent over the paper, pencil scratching, and slowly the cipher-text gave up its secrets.

“Stonegrove 7602.”

Osla drew a breath in as the word crackled along the telephone wires all the way from Yorkshire. Astounding how you could recognize a voice in two words, even when you hadn’t heard it in years. “It’s me,” Osla finally said. “Did you get it?”

Pause. “Goodbye, Osla,” her old friend said coolly. No *who is this*—she knew, too.

“Do not hang up on me, Mrs.—well, whatever your name *is* now.”

“Temper, Os. Feeling out of sorts because you’re not the one marrying a prince in two weeks?”

Osla caught her lip in her teeth before she could snap back. “I’m not faffing about here. Did you get the letter or not?”

“The what?”

“The Vigenere. Mine mentions you.”

“I’m just home from a seaside weekend. I haven’t looked through the post yet.” There was a distant rustle of paper. “Look, why are you ringing me? I don’t—”

“It’s from *her*, you understand me? From the *asylum*.”

A flat, stunned silence.

“It can’t be,” the reply came at last. Osla knew they were both thinking of their former friend. The third point in their shining war-time trio.

More rustling, a tearing sound, then Osla heard a breath and knew that far away in Yorkshire, another block of code had come out of its envelope. “Break it, the way she showed us. The key is *lassies*.”

“English lassies rustling paper through the sodden...” Breaking off before the next word. Secrecy was too much a habit with them both to say anything significant over a telephone line. Live six and a half years with the Official Secrets Act round your neck like a noose, and you became well accustomed to curbing every word and thought. Osla heard a pencil working on the other end, and found herself pacing, three steps across the room, three steps back. The heaps of gowns across the bedroom looked like cheap pirate’s loot, gaudy and half-submerged in the wreckage of tissue and cardboard, memories and time. Three girls laughing, doing up each others’ buttons in a cramped spare bedroom: *There’s a dance in Bedford—an American band, they’ve got all the new Glenn Miller tunes...*

The voice came at last from Yorkshire, uneasy and mulish. “We don’t know it’s her.”

“Don’t be daft, of course it’s her. The stationery, it’s from where she—” Osla chose her words carefully. “Who else would demand our help?”

Pure fury in the words that came spitting back. “I don’t owe her one bloody thing.”

“She clearly thinks differently.”

“Who knows what she thinks? She’s *insane*, remember?”

“She had a breakdown. That doesn’t mean she was loony.”

“She’s been in an asylum for three and a half years.” Flatly. “We have no idea what she’s like now. She certainly *sounds* loony—these things she’s alleging...”

There was no way they could voice, on a public line, what their former friend was alleging.

Osla pressed her fingertips to her eyes. “We’ve got to meet. We can’t discuss this any other way.”

Her former friend’s voice was full of broken glass. “Go to hell, Osla Kendall.”

“We served there together, remember?”

On the other end of Britain, the handset slammed down. Osla lowered her own with shaky calm. *Three girls and a war*, she thought. Once the best of friends.

Until D-Day, the fatal day, when they had splintered apart and become two girls who couldn't stand the sight of each other, and one who had disappeared into a madhouse.

[no ornament]

Inside The Clock

Far away, a gaunt woman stared out the window of her cell and prayed to be believed. She had very little hope. She lived in a house of the mad, where truth became madness and madness, truth.

Welcome to Clockwell.

Life here was like a riddle—a riddle she'd heard during the war, in a Wonderland called Bletchley Park: “What way does a clock go round?”

“Um,” she had answered, flustered. “Clock-wise?”

“Not if you're inside the clock.”

I'm inside the clock now, she thought. *Where everything runs backward, and no one will ever believe a word I say.*

Except—maybe—the two women she had betrayed, who had betrayed her, who had once been her friends.

Please, the woman in the asylum prayed, looking south where her ciphered messages had flown like fragile paper birds. *Believe me.*