DEEP SECRET

Deep Secret

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BERLIE DOHERTY

DEEP SECRET



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To Jacqueline Korn,
in appreciation of her encouragement,
advice and support

1

Are we beautiful? Madeleine looked the question at her sister's reflection in the mirror. Grace's identical reflection looked the answer back, *We think so.*

They had no need for words. It was a slight frown, a flicker of smile, a raised eyebrow, movements that no one else would perceive. Madeleine loosened the blue ribbon that tied back her hair, and Grace did the same, her red ribbon twining round Madeleine's. They scooped back their hair and allowed it to fall again and again, lustrous.

The reflected room behind them was dark with their moving shadows. They could see the pine dresser, their bed, the old chair with its green silk cushions. Grace put out her hand, almost touching the mirror. Her image did the same.

There's another world in there.

It's like ours, but it isn't ours.

Turning the world inside out.

We could float in and out of it.

Madeleine stepped aside, so her reflection disappeared. Grace laughed at her own image.

Is it you in there?

Or you?

Come and see.

Grace allowed her fingers to touch the cold, golden glass. She pressed her palm against it.

Can't go in.

Can't follow.

Lonely.

Madeleine appeared again next to her sister. *I'm always here!*

So am I!

They held hands and swivelled each other round, shrieking with loud laughter. Downstairs in the kitchen their mother and father looked at each other. 'Twins are awake!' Sim Barnes laughed. 'That's today's peace and quiet gone.'

2

Old Aunt Susan woke badly. She often did, these days. She heard a girl's laughter in the farm across the yard outside, and went to her window. 'Is that the twins?' she called. She peered out. A girl with dark red hair was leaning on the gate of the farmyard, laughing across at the young farmer.

'No, it's only their cousin,' Susan muttered. 'Elspeth! I can hear you, Elspeth!' she called out.

The laughter stopped, held on a listening breath.

'And is that Ben you're flirting with?'

Susan tutted, annoyed with herself, and softly closed the window. 'There was no need to say that, you crusty old bird,' she told herself. 'Just because you lost your chance.'

'Will you marry me?' Ben asked Elspeth, suddenly, just as he was opening the gate into the pigsty. He blurted out the words as if he had been holding them so tight inside him that they were no longer particular words with individual weight and significance, but bubbles of wind. 'Pass me the broom,' he might have said or, 'Mind your feet.' Instead it was, 'Will you marry me?'

And when Elspeth gasped and paused behind him, halfway between laughter and astonishment, he put down the swill pail he was carrying and asked her again, but gently this time. 'Elspeth? Will you?'

She hardly paused to take his kiss, but ran till the breath was bursting out of her to get her little brother ready for school, hugging her happiness. Her twin cousins would be the first to know.

Ben went on to the sties. The sow screeched at him, shoving her snout into the bucket before he had time to tip out the swill. 'Garn, you bummer!' A hen bustled round his boots and he toed her out of the way. He glanced across at the windows of old Susan's cottage, frosty with white sun, and cursed her for spoiling his morning.

'He was feeding the pigs!' Grace screeched. She toppled backwards off the low boulder she was sitting on, clutching at Madeleine and bringing her down too. She wiped her eyes on Madeleine's skirt. 'Poor old Ben! What a romantic fool he is!'

'And Aunt Susan spying from her window,' Madeleine giggled. 'I hope you told him you're waiting for his Lordship's nephew to ask you.'

Elspeth smiled, listening to her cousins' teasing laughter. Far up on the side of the hill she could see Ben, working the sheep down with his dog.

'I'm going to marry his Lordship's nephew!' the twins' younger sister Louise said. 'I'm going to live in the Hall and have nine children. And Grace is going to teach them needlework, and you're going to teach them French and music.'

'And where are we going to learn all that?' demanded Madeleine. 'We could teach them how to milk cows, and make—'

'Bramble jam,' Grace put in, 'but that's about all.'

Louise pouched her cheeks and buffed them gently with her fists, making little bursting boufs of contempt.

‘But what did you say to him, Ellie?’ Madeleine asked. She glanced quickly at her sister then, a teasing smile flickering quickly in her eyes. ‘I can just imagine him, poor old Ben, with his mouth hanging open.’

‘And his eyes popping out of his head,’ said Grace.

‘I said . . .’ Elspeth paused. ‘I said . . .’

‘Go on,’ Grace urged her. ‘You said no.’

‘I said I’d see,’ said Elspeth quietly. The laughter stopped. Madeleine and Grace exchanged glances, primming up their lips.

‘Oh, you’re never going to marry Ben!’ Louise blurted out. ‘You know what you have to do, don’t you, when you’re married? You have to kiss him. And he’ll be all mucky and sweaty and smelling of pigs. And you have to do other things, much worse things.’ She swung her head so hard that her plaits smacked her in the face.

‘At nine years old you know more than is good for you,’ said Grace. ‘If Mum heard you—’

‘—she’d make you wash out your mouth with soap,’ Madeleine finished.

‘But not Ben!’ wailed Louise.

‘I said I’d see, that’s all.’ Elspeth looked away from her cousins. From where they were lying, in the hay meadow, they could see the farm that Ben rented from Lord Henry. It was the biggest and oldest in the valley. The sun was striking the stone walls so they glowed as if they had been brushed with gold. *I could live there*, she thought to herself. *I could live there and be happy for the rest of my life*.

‘He’s a good farmer, our Ben,’ Madeleine thickened her voice to make it sound like Ben’s mother, Joan. ‘He comes home with mucky boots from when he’s been feying. That proves it.’

Elspeth giggled with her. She had often watched Ben spreading the patches of horse dung and cow muck with his feet, like all the farmers did, inching its goodness over the pastureland.

'And he's stubborn as a donkey,' Grace went on.

'As fat as his best pig!' said Louise, catching the game her sisters were playing.

'No he isn't!' Grace shook her head at her. 'Don't exaggerate. As pink as one, maybe.'

And, thought Elspeth, though she didn't say it out loud, *he's as loving and gentle as a pigeon.*

Madeleine and Grace carried on in Joan's voice, swapping the story from one to the other, 'He thinks nought of driving—' 'eight hundred sheep to Yorkshire—' 'does our Ben—' 'over the tops, come rain—' 'come wind—'

'—come snow,' they finished in a triumphant chorus.

Elspeth smiled. 'That huge house,' she said dreamily. 'The kitchen is bigger than the schoolroom! And there's just him and his mother in it. It should be full of children, every inch of it!'

'I'm going to travel the world and be cultured,' Louise flopped on to her back, cycling her legs fiercely, 'before I marry his Lordship's nephew. He's a fine soldier, Mum said. Even though the war's been over a whole year, he's still going to fight in Asia for King and Country. That's so romantic. I might just bump into him now, if I bob over and meet Mum.' She jumped up and ran off, skipping lightly over to the stepping stones that led away from the meadow to the rutted cart track below the Hall.

'We're never going to leave the valley,' said Grace. 'Are we, Maddy?'

'Never. We'll work in the Hall, like Mum.'

'And which of you is going to marry Colin, might I ask?' Elspeth teased. 'I know you're both crackers about the vicar's son!'

They looked at each other again, and this time their conversation was silent, shutting out Elspeth. She was used to it. As a little girl, not much older than them, she had tried to imitate their signs and glances, to enter into their silent language of looks and smiles, but it was too quick, too subtle, too exclusive.

'Neither of us,' the twins said at the same time. 'Or both. First one over the stones!' They jumped up and raced to the stepping stones, where the lazy brook trickled down into the valley from Black Tor. Grace jumped lightly from stone to stone, laughing and twisting away from Madeleine. Her sister tried to unbalance her and tip her in.

'He's mine, he's mine!' Grace screamed.

They pulled each other back, splashing and kicking, and both reached the far bank at the same time.

Louise ran past a dusty black car that was parked outside the Hall gates. Its chauffeur was slumped back in his seat, his mouth wide open and his chest rising and falling steadily. Her brother Tommy grinned at her from the running board. She ran up the steps and paused to stroke the stone lions, one on the left, one on the right of the main gateway. She crouched down so she wouldn't be seen from the Hall and made her way through the kitchen gardens to meet her mother. Her father was stooped over a row of cabbages, teasing caterpillars off the leaves and squashing them between his fingers. His Lordship's vegetables supplied the whole village. Sim was proud of that. 'There'll be good grub to carry home today,' he called to Louise. 'His Lordship's had a visitor.'

'I know, Dad,' she said. 'I've seen him. And he won't have ate much. He's right skinny.' Along with all the children she had peered out of the classroom window at the unfamiliar sound of the visitor's car bouncing over the rutted lane earlier that afternoon. A spiky stranger in a black suit had scrambled out, unbending like a folded pole. Miss Skinner, the teacher, had sent the children back to their seats and had spent the rest of the lesson giving them dictation while she gazed at the car, imagining it carrying her away to fancy places. 'He's a doctor,' Tommy had whispered. 'No, he's not,' said Louise. 'He's a bank manager, come to count his Lordship's millions.' The car was still there when they left school, and the boys had tumbled round it, wide-faced with rapture. And it was still there now.

As Louise ran towards the kitchens she was surprised to see old Lord Henry himself standing with his skinny visitor at the back of the Hall. They were deep in animated conversation. His Lordship was angry, she could tell that from his raised voice and the way his hands gestured sharply as he spoke. She hesitated but he had already seen her. He nodded to her and then held out his hand as if he wanted her to go to him. She shrank back, shy.

'This is one of the village children,' he told his visitor. 'Both of her parents work for me at the Hall. How many of you are there in the school, Louise?'

'Twenty, sir,' she said, bobbing. 'The twins left last year when they were fourteen, but they help Miss Skinner out sometimes.'

'You see,' the visitor said. 'Tiny, tiny school. Too small to be viable anyway.'

Lord Henry snorted. 'And there's three farms,' he went on. 'All my tenants. Not to mention the hill farmers on the

tops that use the valley for winter grazing. Then there's the vicarage, the shop, the sawmill. Six mill cottages. A young blind man up on the hill – he does a bit of handiwork round the place for me. Half a dozen other smallholdings tied to my estate.'

'And that's it?'

'And the Hall.' Lord Henry turned and gazed up at the house he visited every summer with his wife, Lady Charlotte. 'This beautiful Hall; 1641, it was built. It's a national treasure.'

'Very pretty.' The visitor scribbled down some notes. 'So how many residents in all?'

'In the village? Including my wife and myself, about sixty. Many of them are related to each other; their families have been in the valley for donkey's years. We lost three in the war. Tragic.'

'A tiny community.' The visitor snapped shut his notebook and slid it into his pocket. He fluttered his fingers at Louise, signalling to her to go away.

'But a community none the less.' Lord Henry put out his hand, which the visitor ignored. 'And therefore your proposal is unthinkable. I bid you good day, sir.'

'I assure you, it is your refusal which is unthinkable. We'll talk again.' The visitor raised his hat slightly and walked past Louise and down the main drive to his car. His chauffeur woke up with a start, jumped out and opened the door for him. The boys on the running board fell away like leaves spinning from trees.

Aunt Susan, sitting in the lane outside her cottage with a sketchpad on her knee, looked up and frowned. She was interested in the reflections on the side of the car, how the roses that tumbled over her wall caught themselves in it as

if the car was painted with yellow flowers. She would have liked to capture it before the visitor left the village.

Louise's cousin Mike had been lovingly stroking the rounded hubs and the boot and, as the driver backed round, his fingermarks shone like jewels. The boys ran alongside the car, waving excitedly, cheering and laughing, ignored by the visitor.

Lord Henry stood watching, tapping the side of his leg as if a fly had landed there to annoy him. The car swung away up the track and round the bend of the hill, out of sight. Dust settled on the track behind it and still he watched. Lady Charlotte came slowly down the path towards him, smiling at Louise. She touched her husband's arm.

'What did he want?'

'Mm? Nothing. A foolish project. Nothing at all. The man's an idiot.'

He took his wife's arm and walked on with her down the path towards the main lawns. They stood on the half-circle of steps between the lions at the gateposts as if they were posing for a photograph, silent and perfectly still, arm in arm.

Louise ran on towards the kitchen. Her mother came out of the kitchen door at that moment, with the remains of the skinny visitor's lunch in a basket on her arm.

'Who was that man?' Louise asked her, lifting up the cloth that covered the basket. Her mother edged her hand away.

'I've no idea,' she said.

'His Lordship doesn't like him,' Louise told her. 'And neither do I.' She lowered her voice. 'Guess what! Ben wants to marry Ellie!'

'Now that's good news,' said her mother. 'It's a grand

old farmhouse, needs living in properly. If his mother will let her, Elspeth will make Ben a very good wife. But some mothers find it very hard to let go of their sons, and I fear Joan's one of 'em. Pity.'

'What d'you mean?'

'Nothing you'd understand. She's full of bitterness, poor woman.'

'Is that why her husband went away?'

'No, love. It's because he went away. Mind you, her heart's always been with someone else.'

'That's so romantic! She has always loved another!' Louise sighed. 'Why didn't she marry him then?'

'Ooh, you're a pest!' her mother laughed. 'He was an older man, that's why, and no doubt she thought she could do better.'

'And has always regretted it.' Louise sighed again.

'Now don't you breathe a word of it to a living soul. It's stuck in the past, that is.'

They went into their cottage, which was like a dark cave after the bright sunlight. Her mother called up the stairs to Madeleine and Grace to get the fire lit, and when there was no reply she sent Louise up to fetch them. Louise loved the twins' room, with its bulging walls and pale rosy wash. They spent hours there, whispering secrets, doing each other's hair, making up songs, practising dance steps. It was their world, and anyone else was a trespasser in it. Louise tiptoed right into its silence, touching their pillows with the tips of her fingers, imagining the girls there, watching her. It's not fair, she said to herself. They have each other, all the time. She caught her reflection in the old Victorian mirror and smiled fleetingly at herself. Then she ran noisily back downstairs again.

'I bet they've gone on to Auntie Susan's. Watching out for Colin when he comes over the packhorse bridge.' She giggled. 'He's back home from boarding school today. Have I to fetch 'em?'

'No, leave 'em be,' her mother said. 'Let's have a quiet few minutes on our own, shall we, Lou? Just us.'

'Just us in the firelight. The way we like it. Watching the shadows dancing on the walls.'

The twins were mixing paints in Susan's kitchen, and every so often one of them would glance over her shoulder to see whether there was any sign of Colin. At one time they would not have admitted aloud to each other that they knew that he was home again, or that they cared, or that they knew the other cared, even though nothing was hidden between them. But now the secret was out, whispered in an evening of confidences in their bulging pink bedroom, and then giggled over. The whole village knew by now, and smiled over it. The twins were in love with the vicar's son, and he with them, and he couldn't tell one from the other of them.

But Colin didn't turn up that afternoon, and after a time the girls stopped watching out for him and absorbed themselves in their paintings. Aunt Susan was in a strange, fidgety grumbling mood when she came in from the lane.

'Are you not very well?' Grace asked her.

'I slept bad last night,' Susan told them, pouting over her unfinished painting of the visitor's car. 'Can't wake my head up proper today.'

'Was it a nightmare, Aunt Susan?' Madeleine asked.

'No, Twinny, not a nightmare. It's a dream what keeps coming again and again, about the dam over the hill. That

dam that bust when I was a girl. You'll have heard your grandad speak of it. Terrible flood it caused.'

'I would have built an ark,' said Grace dreamily. 'And we would all be safe.'

'No time to build arks,' Susan snorted. 'Not when water's got loose. Water's a monster.' And her voice snapped tight then, and there was such pain in her eyes that the girls looked at each other in alarm. She seemed to slip away from them as if she had forgotten they were there and was back in another time.

'Aunt Susan.' Grace recalled her gently, touching her hand. 'Tell us what you think—'

'—of our pictures,' Madeleine said.

Susan leaned forwards and peered at the painting Grace had done of one of the stone lions at the Hall gates.

'It's not bad,' she nodded. 'But it's same as hers, in't it?' She glanced at Madeleine's painting of the other lion. 'Why do you both have to do same?'

'It isn't,' Madeleine pointed out. 'My lion's got his tail tucked round this way.'

'And mine's the other way.'

'But you've both painted the lions! You could have done the gates, or the steps, or the garden, anything, but you have to do same thing, always. And they look the same – you've used exactly the same palette as she has, same style – have you got the right colours on?' She tweaked Madeleine's blue hair ribbon. 'It is Madeleine, isn't it? Same as Grace, you always have to be same as Grace, and she always has to be same as you. You'll never be good painters till you get your own style. One day I want to look at a painting and say that was done by Madeleine, or that was done by Grace.'

'We can't help being the same,' said Madeleine. 'Can we, Grace?'

'It just happens.'

Susan splayed out her fingers in a helpless gesture and laughed. She still couldn't tell one twin from the other, except by the colour of their hair ribbons, and she was sure they switched those round to tease her. She found it easier to call them both Twinny. Even Jenny, their mother, admitted that she got them mixed up. Sometimes Susan wondered whether the twins themselves knew which one of them was which, but only saw their own reflection in each other. *Now there's a bonny thought*, she mused. *Madeleine looks at Grace and thinks, that's what I'm like; that's me. And Grace looks at Madeleine and thinks, that's what I'm like. They only know they're like each other.* The puzzle to her was that one of them was better at art than the other. But just when she thought she had it worked out that it was the one who she thought was Grace who was the better, the one who she thought was Madeleine would draw a beautiful picture or colour something just right. When she pointed this out to them they would just look at her thoughtfully and shrug.

'It's time you found out what makes you different from each other.' Aunt Susan looked at each of them in turn, searching the sweet identical faces, caught as they were at that moment between childhood and womanhood, at fifteen years old. The same physical features, the same voice, the same mind, it seemed. They were endlessly fascinating to her. 'I could try and paint you, and catch the difference. You could paint yourselves. Not each other – your own self-portrait in the mirror.'

The girls flicked smiles to each other. *What was the point*, the smiles said. *They knew which was which, didn't they?*

Aunt Susan started to gather in the brushes and paints, talking half to herself. 'Mind you, mirrors is the hardest thing to paint. Like water. Come another day and we'll think about painting water. Might as well make friends with it. We'll sit by the stepping stones and paint the brook. Full of trout and pebbles and sunlight. That's the colour of rivers.' She clapped her hands together. 'We'll have a storm tonight, I can feel it in the air. Rain'll fetch colours up lovely.'

Grace smiled at her. It was so like Aunt Susan to be sad one minute and happy the next, as if she was slipping between one self and another.

'Might Colin come?' Madeleine asked innocently.

'He might. I could ask him to fetch me some kindling. He'll come if he knows you'll be here.'

The girls exchanged glances and Aunt Susan smiled. 'I might just mention it, if I see him. Go home now. I'm tired. I are tired, as you two used to say when you were toddlers. Remember? I are tired.'

That night the twins lay in their bedroom listening to the rumble of the storm in the hills around the valley. A sudden flash of lightning lit up their room and they clung to each other in mock fear. The thunder cracked closer now, taking the sky in booming strides. Under it all they could hear the river streaming over the stepping stones. Madeleine jumped out of bed and went to the window, opening it wide, turning her face up to the green-black sky. Below her the trees in the churchyard tossed their heads like wild horses. The vicarage was a dark bulk, with here and there a glow of light; the dining room, the vicar's study, Colin's room.

'He's back! His light's on,' she said. 'He must be studying.' She leaned out, holding her face up to the cascading rain, laughing and gasping. 'Colin, we're here!' she called.

Grace pulled her back in.

'I saw him! He waved to me!'

'I don't believe you. He couldn't possibly see you from there!' Grace leaned out, but now she could see that a curtain had been pulled across Colin's window. She turned back to her sister, disappointed.

'What will you do,' she whispered, 'if he asks you to marry him?'

'I'd have to say no,' Madeleine said. She closed her eyes tight against the impossible thought.

'I would too.'

'It's better that way.'

'Promise.'

'I promise.'

'But what if he marries someone else?'

'Don't. We couldn't bear it.'

'It might be better if you married him.' Grace's voice was tiny. They had this conversation often, and sometimes it made them laugh and sometimes it made them cry. They climbed back into bed. 'Better than letting him go to someone else. But you won't, will you?'

'I'd have to say no.'

They lay listening to the storm, the one draping her arm loosely over the other, cradling her against the cold; and when they turned they changed the cradle, their soft breaths falling into sleep.

Colin had been called downstairs to have a late supper with his parents. He was still thinking about the twins

and how he had secretly watched them coming home from Susan's, strangely shy to go up and talk to them. His mother was telling him about the visitor to the Hall and he half listened, letting the girls' names chant in his head. *Maddy. Grace. Grace. Maddy. Madeleine. Ah, Madeleine. His favourite.*

'He didn't look like one of Lord Henry's London friends, you know, the shooting party mob,' his mother said. 'More a business type.'

'I'm sure he came to admire the beauty of the scenery.' The vicar too was only half listening to his wife. 'We must open our arms to them, ramblers and sightseers alike, who spend their days in the smoky grime of the cities.' Then, forgetting the visitor completely, he pushed back his chair and folded his hands behind his head. 'What I would like is a new organ for the church. I thought I might have a word with Lord Henry about it tomorrow. Imagine filling the valley with music!' He hummed loudly, tapping his long fingers together. 'When I walked down from Marty's farm today, with all the colours of the fields around me and those broody storm clouds gathering up there, I could just imagine hearing Bach thundering across the valley.'

'You and your music.' His wife smiled at him fondly and stroked the back of his head, the bit that he couldn't see, where his hair was still black on the nape of his neck.

'We're lucky to live here,' he said. 'We have a preview of paradise.' He leaned forwards and pecked idly at his food, hearing again the imaginary organ rolling across the valley.

'I wish you'd eat more.'

'Food doesn't interest me,' he said. 'You know that. I eat to please you and to stay alive. No other reason.' He stood up and walked to the window.

'Sometimes,' she said to his back, 'I would like to be praised, just a little, for the work I've put in. Even Colin's gone temperamental about his food, moping about those two Barnes girls. He can't even tell which of them is which. I've never heard anything so foolish in my life!' Colin frowned at her from the other end of the table and left the room. It wasn't true. He was only in love with Madeleine, he was sure of that. And if he wasn't always sure which one she was, then it didn't affect his feelings, surely.

He went up to his room at the back of the house. His theology books lay open on the table next to the list of written exercises his father had set him. He had finished at school now, where he was a weekly boarder. His father was tutoring him for a university entrance exam. He wanted Colin to follow his footsteps exactly: to go to the same university, to read theology just as he had done; to become a vicar. If Colin passed his entrance exam and got a place he would be leaving Birchen, and he wouldn't see either of the girls for months on end. He hated the thought of leaving. He didn't even know if he wanted to study theology. He felt he was being swept along in a river; fast, too fast, helpless. He sat with his head in his hands, listening to the growl of thunder.

The girls filled his thoughts, with the same sweet, smiling faces, the same teasing eyes. They had always been his best friends and now, since his last school holiday, the friendship for Madeleine had grown into love. He had kept away from Susan's that day deliberately, knowing that they were painting there, sure that Grace – or was it Madeleine? – would laugh at him if he turned up, torturing himself for staying away. But he had watched them from a

distance and knew that tomorrow, whatever happened, he would try to see them again.

He'll grow out of it, his mother said to herself downstairs. *Once he's at university he'll forget they exist.*

'We could paint this room green,' the vicar said. 'All over, ceiling and all. Imagine. With these big windows, it would look beautiful, the green of outside flooding in and over the walls. What do you think?'

I think you can paint your study green. You can write your sermons in a green room. You can smoke that nasty pipe in a green room. You can recite your poetry in a green room. But here, where I eat the meals that I have cooked for you, I will not have green walls. She said nothing of this aloud. She cleared the table in brooding silence. A sudden crash of thunder startled her so much that she dropped the jug she was holding. It shattered into tiny pieces on the stone floor. The rains came thrashing against the great windows, drowning out the words she might have said.