

INSPIRED BY REMARKABLE TRUE EVENTS IN WWII

OLIVIA SPOONER

THE GIRL

from

LONDON

On a perilous
voyage, she fell
in love.

But will a
devastating attack
tear them apart?



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LONDON

MOA
P R E S S

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London, 1940

Propped against the pillows, Ruth was struggling to keep her eyes open as she read *The Times*; the mid-afternoon heat was making her drowsy. Still, knowing how important it was to keep up to date with the war news, she resisted the pull of sleep.

She turned the page and her eyes immediately moved to the bottom right-hand corner of page four. The headline glowed, as if printed with luminescent ink. She quickly scanned the article then sat up. ‘Peter, listen to this.’

Her fiancé glanced up from his seat at the small table beside the window. He’d been polishing his recently issued boots for the last half-hour. ‘Hm?’

Ruth swung her legs over the side of the bed and began to read aloud. ‘*The Children’s Overseas Reception Board, otherwise known as CORB, are calling on volunteers to act as escorts for children being transported to the dominions as part of the overseas evacuation scheme. We ask for those with experience working with children to apply to the below address. Knowledge*

of the dominions would be useful though not essential.' Ruth looked up at Peter, her eyes wide with excitement. 'Well, what do you think?'

He frowned and shook his head. 'I can't believe any parent would contemplate sending their child to the other side of the world. Or that Churchill would let them go. Hardly a great show of confidence.'

'Whatever do you mean?'

'One minute he's saying we'll stand firm against the enemy, the next he's telling us to abandon ship.'

'He's putting poor, innocent children out of harm's way,' Ruth objected. 'And what mother wouldn't want her child to be sent somewhere safe? I haven't been able to get the looks on the faces of Mrs Hamble's little ones out of my head all day. Imagine how you would have felt as a young boy, being woken in the middle of the night by screaming sirens, rushing to a shelter while clutching a gasmask and wondering if your house would still be standing in the morning or would be blown to smithereens.' Ruth's breath caught in her throat as an image leapt into her head of Brenda trapped in rubble calling for help. She forced the image away, her chest tight. 'You would have been terrified.'

Peter smiled and shook his head again. 'Dearest, you have permanent blinkers on where children are involved. Most young lads find all this thrilling. I expect I would have been the same. It's exciting, Ruth. Invigorating.'

'War is *invigorating*?' Ruth frowned at him. 'That's an awful thing to say.'

Peter shrugged. 'London is buzzing. You said so yourself. It's like we've been jolted into life.'

Ruth threw the paper onto the bed and stood up. The strap of her satin slip had fallen off her shoulder, and she yanked it back up. ‘I said it was chaotic, Peter. Barbed wire going up everywhere, drilling all day and night, sandbagging, these constant ghastly air raids. It’s nervous energy out there, not – not what you’re implying.’

‘And what would that be?’

‘That somehow this is a good thing.’

Pushing back his chair abruptly, Peter took four short paces across Ruth’s bedsit to the tiny kitchen tucked into one corner. He threw a wad of screwed-up newspaper stained with black shoe polish into the rubbish bin, then washed his hands in the sink.

‘I’m sorry,’ Ruth said. ‘That wasn’t fair.’ She went to stand behind him, slipping her arms around his waist and resting her head between his shoulder blades. ‘I simply can’t bear the thought of you going. And I . . . well, I want to go somewhere too. Be useful. I don’t want to stay here and simply wait.’

Peter turned and placed his wet hands lightly on Ruth’s arms. She shivered at the sudden cold on her hot skin. He kissed her on the top of her thick dark curls. ‘I thought you were going to stay with your aunt in the country,’ he said. ‘Away from danger.’

Ruth narrowed her eyes. ‘I never said any such thing.’

‘Your mother told me last night at dinner.’

Scowling, Ruth retrieved the newspaper from the bed and took it to the table, pressing it flat to read the article again. ‘Mother believes if she wants something, it happens,’ she muttered. ‘That’s another reason to apply. I need to get away from her meddling in my life.’

‘Wait.’ Peter strode over, took Ruth’s elbow and turned her towards him. ‘You’re not seriously contemplating applying to be an escort? That’s ludicrous, Ruth.’

‘I’m a teacher, I’ve spent time in New Zealand – I’m exactly the type of person they’re looking for.’

‘But we’re to be married. And there is so much you could be doing *here* for the war effort.’

‘Such as?’

‘Oh, Ruth, you could volunteer for all sorts of things. You’re needed here in England, not on some boat entertaining children.’

‘It’s important work, Peter.’

‘It’s running away from the war, Ruth – and me.’

Ruth crossed her arms. ‘You’re the one who’s disappearing off to France or some other dreadful place.’

Peter dropped his hand from Ruth’s arm and stared at her till she averted her eyes. ‘I’m going to fight for the freedom of our country,’ he said quietly. ‘I would have hoped you would be proud of me.’

Ruth looked back at him, her eyes filling with tears of frustration. ‘I am. And I thought you’d be proud of me applying for this.’ She jabbed a finger at the newspaper. ‘Instead, you want me to go and hide away with my mother, of all people.’

‘That’s ridiculous. You know, you have a habit of doing this, Ruth.’

‘What?’

‘Rushing into things without thinking it through. I love that you’re impulsive, but sometimes you need to recognise the compulsion within yourself. Take time to consider the wider picture.’

‘When have I ever done something without thinking?’

‘This bedsit?’ Peter asked, raising his eyebrows.

Ruth put her hands on her hips. ‘How was I to know it was above a butcher shop when my cousin mentioned it? Besides, I rented this for both of us. You were complaining about how little time we got alone. And we’ve got used to the smell, you said so yourself. Plus, it’s handy having the bus stop right outside.’

‘Those buses run all night long, Ruth. One day the glass is going to fall out of your window from all the rattling. And you never even thought to come and have a look first. You just said you’d take it, sight unseen. Would you honestly have taken this place if you had seen the size of it? It’s smaller than my office. Anyway, this is just one example – I could come up with more.’

Ruth stormed over to her tiny wardrobe and pulled a summer frock off its hanger. She stepped into the dress, and slipped her feet into her favourite pumps. ‘I trust you’re quite done finding fault with your soon-to-be wife.’ She took her handbag off the doorhandle and opened the door.

Peter sighed. ‘Ruth, stay and let’s talk this through. If you’d calm down, you would see –’

‘Stop.’ Ruth held up her palm. ‘I can’t bear to hear any more.’

‘What about the German U-boats? Have you even thought of them? They’re swarming all over the Atlantic right now.’

‘Yes, I know.’

‘They’ll attack anything.’

Ruth stared at her fiancé: at his newly cropped reddish-brown hair; his shockingly pale blue eyes; the moustache above his soft, familiar lips; his broad shoulders beneath the impeccably ironed white shirt. She loved every inch of this man and had done from

the moment she'd laid eyes on him two years earlier. But sometimes she found it difficult to like him. Walking up to Peter, she kissed him lightly on the cheek. Then she picked up the paper and slipped it into her handbag. 'I'm going to see Florrie,' she said, turning back to the door.

'Ruth, please, this isn't the time to go running off to your friend.'

'It's exactly the time,' she said, without turning around, 'to visit a friend who understands what you don't.'

She opened the door, stepped out, and shut it firmly behind her.



On the pavement outside, Ruth paused. The afternoon sun was attempting to melt the streets of London, and her skin prickled in the heat. She knew the right thing would be to go back upstairs. Peter was worried about her safety and he was right; she should be focusing her efforts here at home rather than sailing to the other side of the world. But there had to be a reason she'd spied the article on the exact same day she received a rare letter from her father. He'd been full of his usual enthusiasm for life in New Zealand, and surely his comment that 'you'd be safer out here' meant he wished she would visit him again. She had enjoyed her trip to New Zealand – had it really been three years ago? – and she'd been desperate for him to invite her back. Of course, her mother would have a conniption if he did. While Ruth could never condone her father's decision to abandon his wife and children – the scandal had followed her like a ghost since he'd disappeared the day after her twelfth

birthday – she could understand how he'd been driven to it. The urge he'd had to change the course of his life. To escape.

'Afternoon, Ruth,' Mr Hamble yelled from his shop doorway. He wore a bloodied apron, and his black hair stuck to his forehead. The smell wafting from the open door of his shop was enough to turn Ruth's stomach. Warm air did not mix well with animal blood. 'Another rough night, eh?'

Ruth smiled. 'How are Fred and Annie?'

'Fine, fine. Bored, actually. I don't know what to do with 'em now school's finished. My brother's offered to take 'em, but I'm not packing 'em off to the countryside just yet. No point in running scared before you need to, eh? You must be pleased, though, to have a break?'

Another image of Brenda rushed into Ruth's head. This time the little girl was sitting in her usual seat in the front row of the classroom, her hair in ribbons, her face turned to Ruth as she listened. Brenda had been a quiet student. She had also been intelligent, thoughtful, sensitive and inquisitive.

A fist closed around Ruth's heart and she forced herself to smile. 'To tell the truth, I miss teaching already.'

Mr Hamble laughed and his large belly jiggled. 'I thought you'd be enjoying some quality time with Peter before he leaves.' He gave her a knowing wink.

Feeling a change of subject was in order, Ruth wiped her forehead and said, 'Looks like it's going to be another scorcher.'

'Indeed, indeed. Might as well shut up shop. The queue was round the corner this morning; I got nothin' left now but a couple of pig's heads.'

Ruth thought of her rations book stashed in the top drawer of the kitchen dresser. She should have brought it with her. Peter had been most put out having to eat his toast and marmalade without butter, while Ruth had barely noticed the difference. Sometimes she wondered if she wasn't quite British enough.

'Well, better get on.' Ruth straightened her shoulders, hoping she looked more grown-up and in control than she felt. 'Good day, Mr Hamble.'

She hurried past the greengrocer and a long row of matching white Georgian houses. She would walk through the park, she decided. The underground was bound to be stifling, and the buses were dreadfully unreliable these days.

Crossing the road, Ruth entered Regent's Park. She followed a trio of ducks as they waddled along the path in front of her, slowing her pace to enjoy the simple distraction they provided. Veering off the path, the ducks quacked towards the pond. An abandoned model boat bobbed about in the murky water. Normally the park would be teeming with excited children on a day like today, but Ruth doubted she would bump into a single child now that so many had been evacuated to safer areas. London had never felt so empty.

Passing through the rose garden, Ruth found it hard to believe her country was at war. On this perfect summer's day, as she inhaled the warm, sweetly perfumed air, young men were fighting, shooting at one another, dying. And the enemy drew nearer.

Ruth recalled crossing the Channel a year earlier with her mother on their annual trip to Paris. It had been one of their more successful trips away together. Ruth had been in a relaxed,

forgiving mood, having recently become engaged, and her mother had been in a rare state of calm; she'd barely mentioned Ruth's father and the family he'd left in disgrace and ruin. Paris had been beautiful as always – London's more fashionable twin.

But now Paris had fallen into enemy hands. England was so close, she thought with a shiver; so vulnerable.



Ruth had pressed the buzzer several times and was on the verge of giving up when Florrie's blonde head suddenly appeared at the window above. 'What time do you call this?' she demanded.

'Three o'clock,' Ruth shouted back. 'You can't honestly be in bed.'

'I was up half the night and I've had a frightfully busy morning. Besides, what else is there to do in this heat? Come up.'

The door buzzed, and Ruth entered the cool foyer. The parquet floor smelt of polish, and the banister of the wide sweeping staircase gleamed. 'Your mother coming over then?' Ruth asked, entering Florrie's apartment on the first floor.

Florrie walked out of her kitchen holding a glass of water, wearing nothing but a petticoat and a brassiere. 'She's coming for tea tomorrow – I've been cleaning since I got back from the shelter early this morning.' Florrie sighed dramatically. 'Lord help me.'

Ruth and Florrie had bonded in their first year at teacher training college over their mutual sufferance of their domineering mothers. It was surprising and somewhat embarrassing how many of their conversations through the years had revolved around the topic.

‘I have news,’ Ruth said, pulling the newspaper from her bag. She unfolded it and pointed to the article.

Florrie gave her glass to Ruth, took the paper and scanned the page. When she finished, she raised her eyebrows. ‘You’re going to apply,’ she stated.

‘Peter doesn’t want me to.’

‘Of course he doesn’t. But you’re still going to.’ Another statement.

‘Yes. I think so.’

Florrie shook her head. ‘No thinking about it. This is exactly what you need, Ruth. I haven’t seen this much colour and life in your face since Brenda died.’ Florrie held up her hand. ‘I know, I know, you don’t like to talk about it and you’re very good at pretending you’re fine, but I can read you as easily as this newspaper.’

Ruth was annoyed at Florrie for bringing up Brenda’s name, but she repressed her irritation. Tipping her head to one side, she gave her friend an imploring look.

‘What?’ Florrie asked, suspicious.

‘There’s a certain someone I need your help with,’ Ruth said.

Florrie’s eyes widened. ‘Oh no – no way.’ She thrust the newspaper at Ruth and disappeared into her bedroom.

Ruth followed, watching as Florrie pulled on a pale blue blouse and black skirt. Florrie had the narrowest waist Ruth had even seen. Unfortunately – according to Florrie – this only accentuated the ampleness of her bottom and breasts.

‘Please, Florrie. I can’t do it without you.’

‘No.’ Florrie stood at her dresser and began to brush her long straight hair. ‘I value my life too much.’

‘Mother likes you. She’ll be calmer with you there.’

‘She’ll be beside herself, and you know it. Ask Frank – he’ll hold your hand. Or Peter. Your mother will behave for him.’

Ruth flopped onto the bed. ‘Peter is likely to side with Mother; he’s convinced it’s just another reckless, impulsive idea.’ She lay on her back and stared at the glinting chandelier above her. ‘He accused me of not thinking things through. I would never criticise his character in such a way. It’s . . . it’s demeaning, that’s what it is. And I can’t ask Frank; he just enlisted and –’

Ruth jolted upright at the sound of breaking glass. Florrie was glowering at her, brandishing her hairbrush like a weapon, a bottle of perfume in pieces at her feet. ‘What do you mean Frank joined up?’ Two perfectly round red splotches had appeared on her cheeks.

‘Oh, Florrie, what choice did he have?’

‘He said he wouldn’t. He said it would be better for everyone if he stayed in England and helped by doing what he did best. He’s not cut out for war, Ruth. You *know* he isn’t.’

Ruth looked at Florrie’s shaking hand. ‘He’s entitled to his decision.’

‘You’re simply saying that so you can tell people your brother is going and they’ll stop asking questions.’

‘That’s not true.’ Ruth sprang from the bed and placed her hands on her hips. ‘I hate the thought of Frank going. He never told me he planned to enlist, and if he had I would have tried to talk him out of it. But he’s made his decision, Florrie, and I have to support him. We all do.’

Florrie threw her hairbrush on the bed. 'Now you sound like Peter,' she muttered. 'He talked Frank into it; I bet he did. Doing your duty and all that rubbish.'

'Florrie, listen to yourself. Peter would never do such a thing. Anyway, I thought you and Frank were over. David is the new love of your life.'

Florrie crossed her arms. Her body was tight, rigid.

'Florrie?' Ruth said softly. 'Are you okay?'

With a wail, Florrie collapsed on the bed. 'I can't get over him, Ruth. Heaven knows I've tried. But there's no-one else like him.' Tears streamed down her face. 'If he goes to fight, it will change him, Ruth. All that savagery. He's not meant for war. He's meant to invent, to research; to write boring articles about things no-one but him has a hope of understanding.'

Ruth sat on the bed and stroked Florrie's hair. 'It's going to be okay. He'll survive this. We have to have faith.'

Florrie sniffed. 'It's not about having faith. He's not strong enough, Ruthie.'

Looking towards the tall sash window, Ruth thought of her brother. How different they were from one another. Frank would never do something impulsive. He would examine all the facts, look at every angle, study the details, talk to experts. If Ruth was the thoughtless one, then Frank was the one who thought too much. His decision to enlist would have been long and considered. 'Did I ever tell you about my missing hairpin?'

Florrie raised her tear-stained face to stare at her friend. 'You seriously want to tell me a story about a hairpin?'

‘Well, it’s not about my hairpin as such. It’s more about Frank. Surely I’ve told you the hairpin story. It’s legendary.’

‘Enlighten me.’

‘When I was ten, there was this horrid boy who lived across the road. It was before my father left, when we still lived in that glamorous house in Hampstead.’

‘The one with ten bedrooms and three maids.’

‘That’s the one. Anyway, this boy, Terence, hated me. I have no idea why; the only time I ever spoke to him was when I told him his shirt was missing a button. But he used to tease me, call me names. He constantly had me in tears. His parents had sent him out from America to live with his aunt. She was a mean old lady, always stopping my father in the street to complain about things. I was completely terrified of her.’

‘I’m not grasping the connection to Frank so far.’

‘Give me a chance,’ Ruth said, tugging Florrie’s hair gently. ‘For my tenth birthday, Dad gave me a beautiful hairpin with little pearls on it. Mother thought it was far too grown up for me, but Dad insisted it was perfect. I was really proud of it, and I wore it every chance I could – anything to make my awful, unruly hair more attractive. But, one day I couldn’t find the hairpin anywhere. I was distraught.’

‘Don’t tell me – Terence had it.’

Ruth nodded. ‘Yes, he did. But this is where it gets interesting. Frank had seen Terence pick up the pin from the footpath – it must have fallen out of my hair when I was walking home – and put it in his pocket.’

‘The rotter.’

‘My brother confronted Terence, but he denied he had my pin, so Frank came up with another plan to get it back.’

‘Did the plan have twenty-two steps and involve a manual to implement?’ Florrie asked, raising her eyebrows.

They both laughed. ‘Not quite,’ Ruth said. ‘He was only eight at the time. Anyway, he figured out the window above the conservatory at the back of the dreadful aunt’s house led to Terence’s bedroom, and that night he dragged a ladder out of Dad’s shed, carried it across the road, climbed onto the roof of the conservatory, and placed a dead rat he’d trapped that day on Terence’s windowsill. He’d designed and built some complicated trap and set it every morning down the back of our garden by the stream. Called it his Rat Exterminator.’

‘Course he did,’ Florrie murmured fondly.

‘So, after three more nights of leaving a dead rat on the windowsill, Frank left a rock with a note under it stating that if Terence didn’t give me back my hairpin, the next rat would be in his bed.’

Florrie whistled. ‘Impressive.’

‘But Terence must have shown his aunt the note, because when Frank carried over the ladder the following night, she was waiting for him.’

Florrie gasped. ‘She wasn’t!’

‘Oh yes she was. She marched him into her house and up the stairs to Terence’s room to apologise. Frank told me later Terence looked dreadfully embarrassed.’

‘What happened then?’

‘Frank pulled a rat from his pocket and demanded the hairpin.’

‘He didn’t.’

‘He said he’d put the rat in Terence’s bed unless the hairpin was returned.’

‘Oh, I love him, I really do,’ Florrie said, tears filling her eyes once more.

‘The aunt was in complete hysterics, screaming at Frank to get the disgusting thing out of her house before she had him arrested, but Terence got out of bed, lifted up his mattress and handed Frank my hairpin. Frank walked out of the house, threw the rat in the gutter, retrieved the ladder and left the hairpin on my pillow.’

‘Did he get in trouble?’

‘Oh, mountains of it. He had to beg the aunt’s forgiveness and do extra chores. Mother was so mortified by his behaviour she took to her bed for a week.’

‘That doesn’t surprise me.’

‘Father thought it was hilarious. Said he was proud of Frank for taking a stand.’

Florrie was silent.

Ruth patted her cheek, then dropped to her knees to collect up the bits of broken glass. ‘He’s brave, Florrie,’ she said. ‘That’s my point. And that’s what counts in this war. When you’re brave, you can take whatever is thrown at you and pick yourself up again.’

Florrie slid off the bed and knelt next to Ruth to help. ‘I’ll go with you,’ she said. ‘To tell your mother.’

Ruth met Florrie’s eye. ‘Will you talk to Frank before he goes? Maybe there’s a chance . . .’

‘I don’t know,’ Florrie said, her voice catching. ‘I cheated on him, Ruth.’

‘You had too many martinis, got into a fight with Frank and kissed another man. I’d hardly call it cheating.’

‘It was to Frank. He’s black and white, remember? Grey areas don’t exist for him. I was guilty and that was the end.’

‘Well, perhaps he needs to accept human beings aren’t flawless. I seem to recall he wasn’t above flirting with that silly secretary at his office.’

Florrie bit her lip, and Ruth’s heart sank. When Florrie did that, bad news inevitably followed. ‘What is it?’ Ruth said. ‘Tell me.’

‘David asked me to marry him.’

Ruth swore silently. ‘You said yes, didn’t you?’

Florrie nodded, avoiding Ruth’s eye. ‘It seemed like a good idea. Move to the Scottish Highlands, breed sheep and children.’

‘You hate the countryside!’ Ruth exclaimed.

‘I’ve never lived there before – I might love it. Plus, my mother would never dream of visiting. Far too removed from civilisation . . . and Harrods.’

‘You can’t marry the man to get away from your mother.’

Florrie raised her eyebrows at Ruth meaningfully.

‘What?’ Ruth said.

‘You want to go to New Zealand. It’d be impossible to get further away from your mother if you tried.’

‘That’s not the reason I’m applying. Well, not the only reason, at least.’ Ruth stood and walked to the window. Across the road, a group of men were filling sacks with sand and piling them

against a building. They were drenched in sweat, yet they were laughing, joking with each other as they worked.

On the other side of the world, across vast stretches of ocean, lay a country beset by winter. Beautiful islands of beaches and mountains; a haven where children would be safe. Ruth had failed to save one little girl, but now she had a chance to save other children. It would never make up for the loss of Brenda, but Ruth hoped it might alleviate some of her guilt.

‘I want to help children escape this terrible war,’ murmured Ruth. ‘I want their parents to rest easy, knowing I’ll do my very best to deliver their children safely into the arms of caring New Zealanders.’

‘That’s quite a speech,’ Florrie said.

Ruth turned to look at her. ‘You think I’m being impulsive too?’

Florrie sighed. ‘I think you’re convinced you’re missing out on something.’

‘What?’

‘I’m not sure, but you’ve been looking for it for a long time.’

‘You don’t think I should apply?’

‘On the contrary. You should go. Carry on the search.’

‘Why don’t you apply too? You’ve done some teaching, and you’ve volunteered for the Salvation Army for years.’

Florrie shook her head. ‘I belong in this beautiful, bruised old city.’

‘What about David? Breeding in the Highlands?’

‘I don’t know what to do about him anymore, but I *have* made one decision.’ Florrie stood straighter. ‘I’m going to sign up to

4

London, 1940

‘You cannot be serious, Ruth. What is Peter’s view?’ The infamous Mrs Victoria Best – Ruth’s mother – sat in her velvet chair in the parlour holding her teacup. She wore a chiffon blouse, tartan skirt and lemon yellow cardigan with pearl buttons. Her grey hair was swept into a dignified bun and her face was thick with make-up. Since her husband’s departure, Mrs Best had vowed that no matter what the situation, however dire her financial affairs, no-one in Hampstead or beyond would ever accuse her of having lowered her standards. Ruth was sure the reason her mother refused to use the public shelter during air raids – instead setting up a bed in the cellar – was for fear of not presenting at one hundred per cent her best. Pun intended.

‘Peter doesn’t know yet, Mother. He’s training at Branton Burrows.’

‘Well, then, you must contact him immediately. Tell him what you have done and let him talk some sense into you. Fancy

thinking about leaving now; it's disgraceful.' Mrs Best looked down and brushed her hands along her skirt, smoothing away invisible wrinkles. 'This is simply another one of your foolish ideas, Ruth. It's the war, darling. It makes people restless. You should volunteer, find something to keep you busy till school starts up again. I expect teachers would be useful anywhere. Audrey is helping at the train station now. Imagine it! Your aunt serving tea and toast to soldiers.' Victoria Best shook her head.

The rivalry between Mrs Best and her sister Audrey had existed for as long as Ruth could remember. For years, the two had treated Christmas as an opportunity to upstage the other. A few years earlier Mrs Best had taken great pleasure in showing off her new vacuum cleaner, giving a long and noisy demonstration to Audrey and her three children. Audrey had topped this the following year, when she'd insisted on taking everyone for a ride in her new Bentley. She spoke loudly and repeatedly about obtaining her driver's licence and how easy it was to travel to Bath to visit friends. Mrs Best only rode in the car once, her lips pursed, and complained afterwards of the noise and fumes, declaring she would much rather catch a train.

Ruth placed her teacup carefully on her saucer and tried to look relaxed. 'They were impressed with my application.' She hesitated, glanced at Florrie, then looked back at her mother. 'I have an interview with the CORB office tomorrow. If selected, I need to be ready at a moment's notice.' She breathed faster, unable to hide her excitement. 'It's highly secretive.'

Mrs Best narrowed her eyes. 'You are engaged to be married, Ruth. This is not something you do.'

‘But, Mother, the country has turned on its head – you said so yourself. Women are doing all sorts of things they wouldn’t have dreamt of doing before the war. There isn’t a male taxi driver left in London, and last week I recognised the fire warden as the mother of a boy who was in my class last year. I can tell you, she was the last person in the *world* I would have expected to volunteer for such a role.’

‘They are admirable women stepping up to help our country. You cannot suggest taking children on a ship to the dominions is in any way comparable.’

‘For goodness sake, escorts have been taking children to reception zones in all manner of far-flung places in Wales and Scotland. You’ve been very complimentary of their efforts.’

‘And many of those children are returning home. Children should be with their parents at times like these. It’s unnatural to send them miles away.’

Ruth felt a sharp pang at these words. But she hadn’t told her mother about Brenda, and she couldn’t let her see how much her words stung.

After a long silence, her mother sighed heavily. ‘Let us hear no more about this, Ruth. It’s hard enough to think of Frank leaving soon.’

Florrie’s cup rattled against her saucer at this, drawing Mrs Best’s gaze to her.

‘You’ve been very quiet, Florrie,’ Mrs Best observed. ‘I suppose you are here to help soften the blow?’

Ruth had been wondering when her friend was going to jump in with a show of support.

Florrie took a sip of tea before speaking. 'I understand your reservations, Mrs Best, but I do believe Ruth would be a wonderful representative of Great Britain. Don't you agree?'

Ruth stifled a smile. Oh, Florrie was good.

'In what way?' Mrs Best asked, leaning forward.

'There is a great deal of interest in the overseas evacuation scheme. It has been written about in the newspapers in Canada, South Africa, Australia and New Zealand. I'm sure you've heard about the overwhelming number of families offering to take one, two, even three children. The dominions are eager to do all they can to help us.'

Mrs Best sniffed. 'I wouldn't consider handing over my children to some complete stranger. It's bad enough they're being shipped into the countryside, but to the *dominions*. Heaven knows how they do things over there. They're very behind the times, you know.'

Florrie nodded. 'So I've heard, Mrs Best.' She paused. 'It would be so important for escorts to ensure their young charges upheld proper English principles.'

'Yes, absolutely crucial,' Mrs Best agreed, nodding vigorously. 'Without principles, we might as well be heathens, like those Germans.'

'Well, now, Mother, I'm not sure –'

Florrie flicked Ruth a warning look and Ruth closed her mouth.

'Of course, I would miss Ruth dreadfully,' said Florrie. 'But everyone must do their duty.' Ruth had never seen her friend with such a serious look on her face. Florrie should have been an actress.

‘It would be dangerous,’ Mrs Best objected. ‘There’s news of ships being sunk, you know.’

‘Yes, it’s dreadful,’ said Florrie. ‘Though reassuring to know the children will be accompanied by a naval convoy until they reach safer waters.’

‘Is that so?’

Ruth leapt off her chair and knelt at her mother’s feet, gripping her soft, wrinkled hands. ‘Oh, Mother, please let me do this. I’ll be back in a few months – six at the most.’

Mrs Best regarded Ruth for several seconds, her eyebrows arched in thought. ‘Perhaps the war will be over by then,’ she murmured.

‘Let us hope,’ Ruth whispered, though she had grave doubts.

‘Fancy *both* my children leaving me to deal with the Hun on my own.’ There was a wobble in Mrs Best’s voice. Tears welled in Ruth’s eyes and she tried to blink them away. How could she even contemplate leaving her mother at a time like this?

‘You won’t be alone, Mrs Best.’ Florrie stood. ‘I will be here. Besides, I understand you plan to move out of London.’

Mrs Best’s face softened when she noticed her daughter’s tears, and she reached out to gently pat Ruth’s cheek. ‘None of that now, Ruth. Florrie’s right. We must all do our duty. If mine is to put up with my sister’s hospitality for the remainder of this blasted war, then that is the burden I will bear.’

‘I haven’t been accepted yet, Mother.’

‘Yes, well, they’d be fools not to take you.’ Mrs Best sat back and briskly smoothed her skirt again, pushing Ruth’s hands off her lap in the process. As she resumed her seat, Ruth caught Florrie’s wink.

'I imagine Aunt Audrey will be pleased if you go alone,' said Ruth, wiping her eyes. 'With food rations becoming scarcer, it's getting harder and harder to feed everyone.'

Mrs Best gave a loud harrumph. 'That sister of mine has been hoarding food in her cellar for months. It's all she talks about. Makes my humble stockpile look meagre.'

'Perhaps I can send you some things from New Zealand. I believe they have hardly any rationing at all. Aunt Audrey would be —'

Mrs Best's voice rose. 'You're going to New Zealand?'

Ruth winced at her own thoughtlessness. 'I don't know where I'll be sent if I'm accepted,' she said hastily. 'But New Zealand would be the most likely place because I've been there before. I can prepare the children for what to expect. But there's no guarantee. I might go to Australia, South Africa, maybe Canada.'

'Your father put you up to this,' Mrs Best hissed.

Ruth felt the hairs rise on the back of her neck. 'He knows nothing about it, Mother. I saw the advertisement in *The Times*. This is all my idea.'

'You would do this to me. After everything I have done for you.' Mrs Best rose to her feet, and Ruth quickly stood too. They glowered at one another.

'I'm not doing this to hurt you, Mother.'

Mrs Best strode to the window overlooking the garden. With her back to Ruth, she said in a low voice, 'Promise me you will come back. If you stay there with your . . . if you stay, I will never forgive you.'

Ruth blinked back tears once again. She was a terrible daughter. 'I'll come back, Mother. I promise.'

Mrs Best's shoulders sagged. 'That's that then,' she said. 'My son is leaving for the front line any day, my daughter is planning to sail across dangerous waters, and my country is under attack.' Her eyes were glistening. 'Everything in the world is wrong, Ruthie. Not a thing is right or just, anywhere.'

'Oh, Mother.' Ruth stepped forward and hugged her mother tightly, something she hadn't attempted to do in years. 'I'm sorry,' she murmured, breathing in her mother's familiar lily-of-the-valley scent. 'I'm sorry for everything.'

Her mother returned the hug hesitantly.

'Well, now I've seen everything,' said a deep voice from the doorway.

Ruth and Mrs Best released each other and turned.

'Frank! I didn't know you were home.' Ruth hurried over to hug her brother.

'Arrived just this minute. Mother is kindly taking me in until I head to France in a couple of weeks.'

Frank smelt of cigarettes and had the shadow of a moustache on his upper lip which Ruth resisted the urge to poke fun at.

'What happened to your flat?' she asked.

'I gave it up. No point in paying rent when I'll hardly be there.' He looked across the room. 'Hello, Florrie,' he said, his expression neutral.

'Hello, Frank,' croaked Florrie, her face so ashen Ruth worried she might pass out.

Ruth felt awful. If she'd known Frank was going to be here, she would have forewarned her friend.

'Well,' said Ruth. 'I was telling Mother my news and now you can hear it too.'

Frank glanced at his mother and back to Ruth, his face a picture of consternation. 'Oh, Ruth, you're not bringing the wedding forward, are you? All the girls in Britain seem to think they must get married before their fiancés leave.'

Ruth laughed. 'No, Frank. We plan to marry when this blasted war is over and not before.'

Mrs Best sniffed loudly. 'Well, I believe girls *should* have the security of marriage before their men abandon them. Plus, you would be entitled to allowances.'

Both Ruth and Frank knew better than to argue.

'Well,' said Frank, 'if an early wedding isn't on the cards, I must confess I have an inkling of your news already.'

'You have?' Ruth frowned at her brother's teasing smile.

Frank nodded. 'When I spoke to Florrie last week, she may have let slip about your application to be an escort on one of those ships heading to the dominions. I'm assuming you were successful.'

Ruth's eyes widened. Florrie hadn't mentioned that she and Frank had been in touch. Ruth immediately wondered what else they had spoken about. 'I have an interview tomorrow,' she said. 'I haven't been accepted yet.'

'I'll be honest,' Frank said. 'I don't fully agree with this notion of sending children overseas. And I understand Churchill has his misgivings, as it creates an unpleasant air of defeatism. I saw those queues of parents at the CORB office last week – they stretched for miles – and I have a friend working there who says they've had to take on more than six hundred staff in order to deal with all the applications.'

‘Parents are scared for their children,’ said Ruth. ‘Can you really blame them for wanting to try to keep them safe?’

‘It must be a very difficult decision – one I’m relieved I don’t have to make.’

‘So you don’t think I should have applied?’ said Ruth.

‘I think it’s brave of you to volunteer, and I know how much you love an adventure.’

‘That’s not why –’

Frank held up his hand. ‘I know that’s not the main reason, but it can’t be denied that only the more adventurous types would contemplate going. I will say they would be lucky to have you, the children especially.’

‘Thank you.’

Frank crossed the room, bending down to kiss his mother on the cheek. Then he sat in the chair Ruth had recently vacated, leant back and folded his arms, crossing his legs at the ankles. ‘Well, I have some interesting news of my own.’ Rather than look at Ruth or Mrs Best, he stared at Florrie, who had moved to stand by the window. They looked at each other without speaking for several moments, and Ruth had a strange sensation of vertigo.

‘You’ve decided not to go,’ Mother said in a quavering voice.

‘No . . .’ Frank faltered, his voice cracking. ‘That decision won’t change.’

‘What then?’ Ruth asked, her pulse racing.

Frank looked from their mother to Ruth. ‘I’ve decided to get married.’

Ruth froze.

‘It seems I’m one of those lads who wants to get things sorted before I leave. Of course, I haven’t asked the young lady to marry

me yet, so I might be getting ahead of myself. But I think the war serves to focus the mind . . . and the heart . . . on what's important.'

Ruth struggled to find her voice. 'But . . . but you can't. You can't marry someone we've never met.'

Florrie fell backwards against the window frame with a thud.

'Frank!' Ruth shouted. 'You can't do this to Florrie.'

Frank stood, his face red. 'It's her I mean to ask, silly,' he said softly.

Florrie crumpled onto her knees, and Frank strode over to pull her to her feet. She placed a hand over his mouth. 'Don't,' she whispered.

He pulled her hand away. 'Florrie, I'm sorry, I needed a little time to think, you know how I am, but —'

Florrie's hand clamped over his mouth again. 'I refuse to accept your proposal in front of your *mother*, Frank. At least have the decency to take me to another room.'

A tiny squeal escaped from Ruth's lips as she hurried over to throw her arms around her brother and best friend. 'I can't believe it!'

'I haven't asked her yet,' Frank said gruffly.

Ruth glanced over his shoulder. 'Mother, are you okay?'

Tears were flowing freely down her mother's face. 'Ask her now, Frank,' Mrs Best choked out. 'Take her into the garden and ask her right this minute.'

Frank glanced at Ruth and raised his eyebrows. 'Very well, Mother, if you insist.'

Florrie smiled tremulously as he took her hand and led her from the room.

Pulling a handkerchief from her pocket, Ruth handed it to her mother and sat down heavily in the chair next to her. They were silent, but for the odd sniff from Mother as they listened to the faint low rumble of Frank's voice.

'I thought their romance had ended,' Mrs Best said.

'So did I.'

Minutes later, Frank and Florrie re-entered the room, holding hands and beaming.

'Florrie has agreed to marry me,' Frank said, 'on one condition.'

'What's that?' Ruth asked.

'That when the war is over, we have a glorious wedding with all the trimmings.'

Ruth laughed. 'That would be right.'

Mrs Best cleared her throat loudly. Frank approached and, taking her outstretched hand, helped her to her feet. 'Mother, I apologise for springing this on you.'

'Nonsense, my boy.' Mrs Best tossed her head and patted Frank awkwardly on the arm. 'You know I think very highly of that girl.' She glanced at Florrie. 'Lord knows, I've seen enough of you over the years.'

Florrie stepped forward and gave Mrs Best an awkward hug. 'I'll take good care of him, Mrs Best.'

Ruth jumped as an air-raid siren began its familiar wail. 'Drat,' she said loudly.

'Right, everyone down to the cellar,' Mrs Best ordered. 'We can toast your good health and fortune down there.'

'We can?' Frank asked.

'I put aside a bottle of champagne the day this dreadful war started,' Mother said over her shoulder as she led them towards

the cellar stairs. 'I was saving it till victory, but we will open it now instead.'

Ruth stared at her brother, stunned.

'The wonders of war,' he said, smiling broadly at his sister before gently kissing his fiancée's hand.

'Wonders indeed,' Ruth said, following them from the room.



Lying on her bed a few weeks later, Ruth tried to ignore the fact her bedsit felt like a furnace. She couldn't possibly open her window to let in cooler air as the smell wafting up from the butcher below was so abhorrent. If Peter were beside her he'd be chuckling, telling her, 'I told you so,' and reminding her once again how impulsive she could be.

Was volunteering to transport children to the other side of the world simply another impulsive act? One she might live to regret as much as she currently regretted renting this small, stuffy room? Neither Ruth nor Peter had mentioned the article in the paper again before he'd left for training, though Ruth suspected Peter knew she hadn't dismissed the idea. Now she would have to tell him that she'd received the official letter of acceptance from CORB. But what if he demanded she stay? What would she do then? Would she really be willing to defy him?

She'd just have to break the news gently, she decided. First she'd tell him about Florrie and Frank's engagement, then . . . then she would tell him that she'd applied to CORB and been accepted. She'd tell him she'd given it a great deal of thought and it was important to her. She'd say his support meant everything to her, but she was going regardless.

Sighing loudly, Ruth rolled onto her side. What was she thinking, leaving England? Leaving her family, her friends, her fiancé? It was a ridiculous notion, and yet every time she thought about boarding a ship and heading across the sea with those poor, scared children, her heart would thump and she'd be overwhelmed with the complete and utter conviction that this was the one thing she was called to do. Ruth hoped CORB would be in touch soon with a departure date. The longer she stayed, the harder it would be to leave.



A telegram finally arrived from the CORB office one week later. The following day, Ruth was to take the morning train to Liverpool, where she would be met by CORB personnel. Further information would be given on arrival.

'You don't even know where you're going?' Florrie exclaimed. She had stopped by Ruth's bedsit on the way home from her night shift and was still in her ambulance uniform. She smelt strongly of antiseptic and petrol fumes.

'I'm sure it will be New Zealand.'

Florrie pushed open the window, lit a cigarette, inhaled deeply and closed her eyes. 'What a night,' she said, blowing smoke outside. 'Just as well you're going now, Ruthie – though I shall miss you terribly.'

Ruth sat heavily on her bed. 'All of a sudden I'm not sure.'

'About what?'

'About going. What am I doing leaving London at a time like this?'

‘Oh, Ruth, it’s too late to have doubts now. You’ll be fine once you’re on the boat. It’s the leaving that’s hard.’ From the stricken look on Florrie’s face, Ruth knew she was thinking of Frank. They’d heard nothing from him since he’d left for France, and Florrie refused to listen to the radio or read the paper, insisting it was easier not to know.

‘I hate leaving you and Mother,’ said Ruth. ‘I sent a telegram to Peter this morning, but I could be gone before he reads it. I’m sure he believes I’ll change my mind and stay. He said as much when I spoke to him last week.’ The conversation had been strained, but after a prolonged silence Peter had finally said that, while he was disappointed, if it meant so much to her he’d support her decision.

Florrie studied Ruth for a moment. ‘You have to do what’s right for you, honey. It’s the only way to stay sane in all this madness.’

‘I’ll regret it if I don’t go,’ Ruth said quietly.

‘Well, there’s your answer.’ Florrie stubbed out her cigarette. ‘I’m going to head home for a bath and a rest. I’ll be back this afternoon to help you pack.’

Florrie walked over to Ruth and laid her hand on Ruth’s head. ‘Just make sure you come back, okay?’

Ruth nodded. ‘And you be sure to stay safe,’ she whispered.

Florrie sighed. ‘I’ll do my best. Just like everyone else.’



The Girl from London is Olivia's first historical fiction novel. She is the author of two contemporary novels, *A Way Back to Happy* and *A Bumpy Year*. Olivia lives with her family in Auckland, New Zealand, and runs her own business, The Booklover Bookshop, an independent bookstore in the seaside suburb of Milford. To find out more about Olivia and for book club notes, go to oliviaspooner.com

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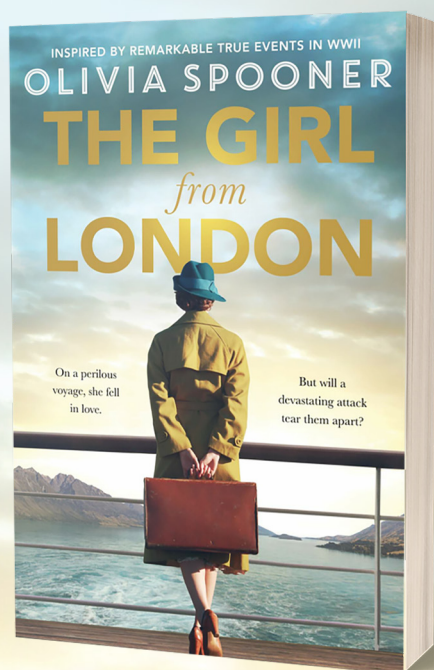
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