

AN EXCERPT FROM

OLIVE BRIGHT, PIGEONEER

Stephanie Graves

For interview requests, events, and other publicity-related queries, please contact:

Larissa Ackerman, Communications Manager / LAckerman@KensingtonBooks.com

Vida Engstrand, Communications Director / VEngstrand@KensingtonBooks.com



www.kensingtonbooks.com

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For those whose stories have not yet been told.

“If it became necessary immediately to discard every line and method of communications used on the front, except one, and it were left to me to select that one method, I should unhesitatingly choose the pigeons.”

—Major General Fowler, Chief of Signals and Communications, British Army

*Saturday, 9 September 1939
Peregrine Hall, Pibley
Hertfordshire*

I admit, my introduction to Mass Observation did little to convince me of the project's worth or significance. The efforts expended in gauging popular opinion and collecting general observations on the coronation of King George VI likely yielded nothing of much use to anyone. However, the situation has changed. Britain has engaged in a second war with Germany, and as such, I have decided to answer that organization's appeal to take up our pens and record our experiences of these long, bitter days ahead. Let there be no misapprehension; my intention is not to record the tedious daily minutiae that will fill the pages of other diarists, but to capture the triumphs and hardships that will create the landscape of this war on the home front. Days will be dark, and each of us will be tested, our true natures laid bare. I won't promise to stay silent when coming face-to-face with treachery, but in these pages, I will endeavour to allow all to remain anonymous. Nevertheless, truth will out, and we will persevere. Rule, Britannia!

V.A.E. Husselbee

Chapter I

Thursday, 1st May 1941
Pipley, Hertfordshire

Olive Bright coasted to a stop beside a familiar figure, turned out respectably in the Wedgwood-blue uniform of the British Royal Air Force, her gaze arrowing to the telltale white flash on his cap, which signified he hadn't yet completed his training. He was waiting just shy of the St Margarets station platform, away from the bustle of activity, but close enough to hear the boarding call. Waiting to tell her goodbye.

Swallowing down emotion and schooling her features, she slid off her bicycle, propped it against the brick wall of the station, and unlatched the wicker carrier basket strapped to its handlebars. When she turned back, her face was suffused with mischief.

"Olive . . ." George was always saying her name that way: a gloss of warning over exasperated finality.

"For luck," she insisted.

George's blue eyes met the glassy dark one peering at him from a narrow opening in the wicker. Olive considered his dubiousness rather disheartening, but she wasn't about to let it bother her today. He and his stolid lack of imagination were so dear to her; it was entirely appropriate that he shouldn't make this easy. "You know I can't take her," he said, his Adam's apple roving uncertainly.

Even as she smiled at him, she could feel the nervous tension undoing her efforts, threatening to thwart the stiff upper lip that was to have been her last resort. Needing a moment, she rolled her eyes away from him, blinked up into the apricot clouds that crowned a pale lavender sky. It could have been any other spring morning. Except that it wasn't.

She swallowed past the lump in her throat, her gaze swinging down again to clap solidly on the tall, dark-haired, square-jawed fellow in front of her. He was a perfect melding of his father's rough masculinity and his mother's classical features, but he was like neither of them. It would be a long while before he came home again—she refused to even consider the possibility that he might not.

Olive had managed mostly to ignore the sharp nip in the air on her ride to the village, but the chill that swept over her now seeped through her jumper and goosefleshed skin, straight to her bones. She tipped her head down quickly and scuffed her feet over the gravelled road. She'd been fiercely proud when George had joined up, prouder still when he'd graduated from the Elementary Flying Training School. Now he was being shipped off for training in service flying—all the things he'd need to know for piloting an aeroplane in war. It was the last step before he'd earn his sergeant stripes and Royal Air Force wings.

Olive beamed at him, clenching her jaw to hold the smile in place as her eyes ranged over his face, urgently memorising the deep dimple in his left cheek, the snapping blue of his eyes, and the two tiny pale white scars on his temple, which served as markers of a long-ago cautionary tale. The dutiful Watson to her high-handed Sherlock, George had chivalrously let her run herd on him for the better part of their still young lives. After today, she'd no longer have a part in his adventures; he was leaving her behind. And that was intolerable.

Her older brother Lewis had been gone for over a year now, serving as a British liaison officer in Greece. They hadn't had a

letter from him in three months, and Olive couldn't look at the little framed photograph of him, dashing in cricket whites, posing on the village green, without succumbing to a crushing feeling of helplessness.

Forcibly tamping down the negative emotions, she lifted her chin, even at the risk of exposing the quiver in her lower lip. There'd be time for a good wallow later. Right now, George needed one last knuckling under before he stepped beyond her reach.

"*Why* can't you take her?" she demanded.

"This is the real thing, Olive. The War Office, official business. Packing a stowaway"—he eyed the basket with exasperation—"is surely grounds for an unpleasant sort of punishment."

Olive's lips twisted with nostalgia. George could always be depended upon to muster a cautious, sensible objection to every impulsive suggestion. Who would temper her wilder impulses while he was gone?

She propped the basket under her arm and released the catch. A rounded grey head poked itself curiously into the conversation, as if to say, "Who would dare object?"

George's shoulders slumped farther, and Olive grinned encouragingly.

"It's not as if the RAF is anti-pigeon," she reminded him. "Quite the opposite. These birds have been carrying messages since the beginning of the war, selflessly doing their bit. Before that it was the Great War, and before that—"

"Save it," he said dryly.

"Poppins is a racer. She's trained for this sort of thing," Olive pressed. "Release her wherever the fancy strikes—the farther away the better—and she'll fly right home." She flashed a broad smile. "With no one the wiser."

He let his gaze roll away, a hint that he was caving. "But Poppins is a civilian," he said, his tone no longer quite as adamant.

"For now," Olive countered, her brows lifting defiantly. "She

is at His Majesty's service." She attempted an awkward curtsy. "You know Dad notified the Pigeon Service committee that our lofts are available for the war effort," she reminded him. "We simply haven't received our certification. I'm sure it's an administrative oversight," she said crisply.

It was more likely that her father's imperious manner had raised the committee's hackles. While he'd jumped at the opportunity to enrol the Bright loft with the Service, envisioning their birds winging top-secret, mission-critical messages across the Channel for Britain, he'd been considerably less enthusiastic about relinquishing control of his loft. He had, in fact, informed the committee of fanciers put in charge of vetting local lofts that if they wanted his racers, then they were going to get him, as well. If he imagined that might sweeten the deal, he was mistaken: it seemed they wanted neither.

Olive was convinced that if the Bright loft had a file at the National Pigeon Service, it was surely marked *LAST RESORT*, but she was determined to calm any ruffled feathers, so to speak. The war effort needed excellent pigeons, and if the racing sheets were any indication, the birds she'd trained were some of the best.

George hoisted his duffel higher on his shoulder and eyed Poppins distrustfully. "And what, may I ask, did Mr Bright have to say about you absconding with the loft's champion pigeon and entrusting her to my care?"

Olive's spine straightened, her chin levelled, and her eyes calmly met his. "He didn't say a word."

"You didn't tell him, did you?"

When she didn't respond, the barest smile tugged at the corners of his lips. He knew her very well indeed.

And yet, Olive couldn't help but acknowledge that he was a far cry from the boy who'd tripped along beside her for so many years. His hair, beneath the cap, was slicked back; his jaw shaven smooth; and his eyes were heavy with responsibility. She didn't

want to think about her own eyes and hair; she probably looked a fright, but George didn't bat an eye.

He had never borne up well against tears, and if she'd chosen to manipulate him with their sudden appearance, he wouldn't have stood a chance. But they both knew she wouldn't stoop to such a deceit. Her heart was being ravaged, and tears were coming whether he liked it or not. In what was surely a last-ditch effort to stave them off, he extended his hand for the basket. Sighing with relief, she offered it, then quickly turned her face to the wind, in the hope that it would dry her eyes and cool the achy flush in her face.

"No promises," he said as she turned back. "It's entirely possible she'll get released from the train window as soon as we pull away from the station."

"Don't be such a spoilsport," she admonished, peering in at the bird in the basket. The pale, opalescent colours at her throat shimmered in the darkened space like a sprinkle of fairy dust. In fairness, Olive was willing to concede that this probably wasn't her most auspicious idea, but it wouldn't hurt anyone, either. George wasn't going off to war—not yet. He was headed to an RAF airbase outside of London. If anyone suspected he was harbouring a stowaway, he need only get rid of the evidence. Poppins would handle herself just fine. She was Olive's best bird, and their last chance to thwart the censors, their last bit of mischief for a very long time.

She bobbed her head, feeling no compunction about sending her along. "Watch over him, Mary Poppins," she murmured, "and fly home safe." Olive fastened the basket closed and shifted her attention to George. "She has enough feed and water for a couple days, and there's paper and a bit of lead in the canister attached to her leg. Send me a joke, preferably inappropriate. A limerick would be even better." She managed a watery smile as all around them, teary mothers and sweethearts were clinging to their young

men in uniform, dreading the moment when they'd have to say their final goodbyes.

George nodded, looking as if he could see right through her brave front. "I'll miss you, Olive." His voice was reassuringly steady as he engulfed her in a tight hug, careful to hold the basket clear. Too soon, he pulled away but stood still, staring down at her. Grinning, he made a fist and clipped her lightly on the jaw. "If anything has prepared me for this, it was tagging along in your wake. You're as domineering as any commanding officer."

"You're already a hero, George," she said crisply before planting a hard kiss high on his cheekbone. "Remember that and don't go daredevil about." Her eyes burned against the tears.

"What's it to be, then?" he asked with amusement. "Am I a spoilsport or a daredevil?"

"Obviously, it depends on the situation." She pursed her lips primly, patiently, the way she'd always done when hoping to get her way. "Don't get cocky," she added as he hoisted his duffel one final time, the precursor to goodbye. "It affects your aim," she reminded him.

"I'll remember that." He nodded, then shot her a grin as the porter called the all aboard. "You know we would have made a great team," he said, walking backwards, away from her. "Me at the controls, you as the gunner."

"The best," she agreed, a new lump in her throat. If it weren't for that pesky royal proclamation that forbade women from operating deadly weapons during wartime, they would have been inseparable. The king was evidently inclined to turn a blind eye to everyday life in the country—she'd been firing a rifle since her tenth birthday. She'd shot down her share of falcons, the natural enemy of pigeons, but the Nazis, a much more dangerous predator, had been deemed off-limits for women. No matter if they *were* crack shots. "Make sure you find someone almost as good," she instructed, swallowing with difficulty. There wasn't time to

tell him she intended to get as close to manning a gun against the Germans as she possibly could.

“Will do,” he said, putting a hand up in one final goodbye. “Keep an eye on Mom and Dad and Gillian for me, would you?”

Olive nodded solemnly—she could picture them, sitting around the breakfast table, having already said their goodbyes. They were the sort to get on with things. She wasn’t nearly as self-possessed, a fact her mother had considered a particular shortcoming. As he turned and walked the remaining steps to the corner, she kept her gaze riveted on the vulnerable strip of exposed skin at the back of his neck, just above his collar, until he disappeared from view. She locked her knees to resist running after him and turned away, abruptly taking hold of her handlebars.

Barring any unforeseen circumstances, Poppins would likely be back that very afternoon, but Olive had no way of knowing when she’d set eyes on George again. A fist of worry lodged in the centre of her chest.

As she stood, disheartened, her eye caught on a tall, lithe woman exiting the station, her luggage gripped tightly in hand. She moved with a sinuous grace, clad in wide-legged grey trousers and a trim jacket the colour of eggplant, a curlicue pattern of embroidery adorning the shoulders. Her red-gold hair was cut short and stylish under a dark blue beret cap with a rakishly turned brim and a fanciful ribbon flower of cream and gold. Olive’s eyes followed distractedly. There was something familiar about her, but it wasn’t until she’d angled her head at a passing gentleman, revealing the coquettish slant of her eyes and the mischievous pout of her lips, that the mystery was solved.

It seemed Violet Darling had finally come home.

A prick of curious interest pierced the numbness that was rapidly settling over her, but Olive couldn’t be bothered to give it her attention. She was too busy wheeling her bicycle back toward the village, trying not to consider that her best friend had just boarded a train that would shortly be steaming out of the station

in the other direction. As her steps carried her down the lane, her vision blurred with tears. She could feel a great gaping void cracking open in her chest, and it was quite clear that if she was going to make it through this war, she was going to need to fill the gap quickly. Luckily, she had a plan.

Olive heard the news stories on the wireless every evening. If the Allies were going to come out on the other side of this war victorious, everyone had to do their bit. For her stepmother, that meant the Women's Institute and its ceaseless schemes and fundraisers. For her father, she could only hope it meant a relaxed perspective on his beloved pigeons, work as usual as a veterinary surgeon, and the relative safety of the Home Guard. And for Jonathon, their resident evacuee, who had arrived unexpectedly and rooted himself so thoroughly in their lives that they'd be loathe to see him go, it entailed a thriving victory garden, an enviable salvage collection, and ever-changing plans to thwart a German invasion. As for Olive, she held on to a rather desperate hope that her part in the war would defy expectation.

She'd been halfway through her studies at the Royal Veterinary College in London when the school had been evacuated to Berkshire. News from home hadn't been encouraging: her stepmother Harriet was bravely, if rather distressingly, waging a worsening battle with multiple sclerosis, and her father was struggling to keep up with the demands of his busy animal surgery. So, she'd decided to come home.

As it turned out, he'd been in particular need of someone to rout the steady stream of villagers who'd been spooked into thinking their pets could not weather the war and therefore must be humanely dispatched. She had cajoled, badgered, and bullied as necessary and was relieved to have been mostly successful. There *were* now two extra cats prowling about the lodge, much to the irritation of the pigeons, but the sight of them never failed to lift Olive's spirits.

It was these little victories, more than anything else, that had

brought the war into sharp and jarring focus and sparked in her a sense of urgency for something just out of reach. She'd been fidgety for months, knitting imperfect grey socks, baking grey bread, and assisting with all manner of tasks under mostly grey skies. All of it had left her feeling helpless, resentful, and vaguely guilty. It hadn't endeared her to the ladies of the WI, either. She expected they'd be much relieved to see her focusing her efforts elsewhere, particularly as she intended to follow the lead of Winston Churchill's youngest daughter.

Mary Spencer-Churchill had been interviewed on the wireless the previous evening, talking of her work for the Auxiliary Territorial Service, in which she served on a mixed-gender battery in Hyde Park. When the prime minister had authorised women to help operate the anti-aircraft guns, his daughter had signed up to serve in the ATS that very day. As Olive sat, rapt with attention, curled up on a leather wingback in her father's study, Miss Churchill had outlined the opportunities for women as spotters, rangefinders, and predictors. They could do absolutely everything, it seemed, except fire the guns. Thoroughly exasperated by such rampant unfairness, Olive was nonetheless willing to overlook it, and she had promptly imagined herself amid the noise and commotion of a gun emplacement in London or farther afield.

Caught up with excitement and patriotic fervour, she'd found she had no one to confide in. Harriet had gone up to bed shortly after dinner; her father had fallen asleep in the chair across from her; and Jonathon had been engrossed in the latest Bigglesworth story, lying on his stomach before their sad little evening fire. Probably for the best: her father would surely have objected to such a spontaneous decision. If she were to convince him, she'd need to plan her argument, being careful to downplay the risks involved while emphasising her aptitude and the need to do her bit. So, she'd switched off the wireless, planted a distracted kiss on her father's downy head, ruffled Jonathon's tousled locks,

and climbed the stairs, her thoughts fractured and fizzing with the enormity of change on the horizon.

She'd had to bite back the words a moment ago with George—there had been more important things to say, and nothing was settled yet. But it would be; she was determined that it would be.

An unexpected gust had her clapping her free hand over her hat, lest it go tumbling along the river. At the same moment, the train's whistle sounded as its engine churned into motion, on its determined way to London. Rather than turn around, Olive walked on, resolved to get on with things.

Well aware that war was a study in distraction, she stopped to peer in the window of H. Ware, Chemist, at the much-diminished display of cosmetics, perfume, and other ladies' toiletry items. She heard the snick of the door opening just beside her. Before she could turn, she was unceremoniously thrust forward and nearly tumbled over her bicycle.

"This is a shop," a clipped voice informed her, "not a museum, Miss Bright. Kindly move yourself out of the way."

Olive rallied and turned to find Miss Verity Husselbee glaring daggers. Her silver-chestnut hair was neatly rolled and tucked beneath a forest-green felt hat, her wide-set hazel eyes were slightly squinty beneath downturned brows, and her nostrils were flared with affront. She was outfitted in camel-coloured trousers, a belted tweed jacket, and well-worn boots, a pair of binoculars hanging from her neck, as if she was off to hike the Inner Hebrides instead of simply planning to terrorise a village.

Olive was in no mood for a verbal lashing, particularly an unwarranted one. She glanced pointedly at the CLOSED sign on the door in question before answering glibly, "Given that the shop doesn't open for another hour, I thought I *was* safely out of the way. Then again, I hadn't expected to confound a burglar before breakfast."

Miss Husselbee snorted her displeasure, looking and sounding rather like her father's fusty old piebald. "The door," she said

haughtily, “was unlocked. Naturally, I stepped in. I was thinking only of efficiency, a quality, it seems, Dr Ware does not value particularly highly.” She glanced irritably back at the windowed door through which she had sailed a moment ago, then speared Olive with a pointed look. “I wouldn’t trust him if I were you.”

Content to be distracted, Olive promptly propped her bicycle against the building’s inky blue exterior. Miss Husselbee’s nerve was the stuff of legend, and villagers were often to be found whiling away an evening at the pub telling tales—real and imagined—of the woman’s inarguable cheek. Olive’s favourite involved a facetious encounter with Herr Hitler, in which she denounced his moustache as an impotent caterpillar with delusions of grandeur. While the beastly little German’s reach may not yet have extended to Pibley, the village had been waging a quiet war with its very own tweedy autocrat for quite some time.

The only daughter of a long-dead local magistrate and his hawkish wife, Verity Husselbee lived alone at Peregrine Hall on the outskirts of the village, along the banks of the River Lea. She had a strong sense of the proper way to do things and a compulsion to impose her will on others in the interest of the greater good. Naturally, this tendency was not generally well received.

Her habit of wearing binoculars didn’t help the situation. Miss Husselbee claimed she kept them on hand for birdwatching, but the villagers suspected a more nefarious intent. Her seemingly innocent umbrella was resented in equal measure, as she had a habit of tapping its ferrule on the pavement whenever someone’s comment or behaviour prompted even a whiff of disapproval. The rat-a-tat of her approach was as effective as an air-raid siren, causing villagers to whip around corners and dodge into shops in a desperate attempt to steer clear of notice.

Olive had long suspected the bluster was prompted by loneliness. Certain a loft full of avian friends was the answer, she’d taken to accosting the older woman whenever she had a pigeon in tow. Unfortunately, the busybodying had carried on, but Olive

liked to think Miss Husselbee took secret pleasure in the camaraderie.

Olive's mother hadn't got along with the older woman, but Harriet had forged a special bond with Miss Husselbee. Her stepmother had been walking home from the village on an autumn afternoon and had collapsed some distance from the lodge. Frightened by her suddenly worsened condition, she'd begun to panic. And then she'd heard the approach of a familiar umbrella. As Harriet told the story, Miss Husselbee had promptly taken charge, conscripting a trio of Girl Guides with an empty trek cart to assist. Within moments, Harriet had been tucked carefully into the cart and was being pushed along the lane, accompanied by a retinue of followers, all of them singing cheery songs—Miss Husselbee, evidently, the loudest of them all. Since the rescue, the two women had become fast friends, and Miss Husselbee would often pop in to check on Harriet's condition, the pigeons, and, to his utter exasperation, the state of Olive's father's surgery. Olive had taken to calling her the Sergeant Major, but never to her face.

"Why shouldn't I trust him?" Olive whispered sotto voce, linking her arm with Miss Husselbee's, as if the pair of them was thick as thieves.

"All sorts of reasons," said the older woman, extracting her arm from Olive's grasp. "And I couldn't possibly discuss them with you. Loose lips sink ships, Miss Bright, or haven't you been paying attention?"

"Clearly, Dr Ware is keeping everything shipshape," Olive said, continuing with the nautical theme, "otherwise he wouldn't be so tediously secretive." She offered an exaggerated wink for good measure.

"Don't be impertinent, young lady," Miss Husselbee demanded, her frown lines settling in comfortably. "I'm certain Harriet would want you to heed my warning."

Olive relished her response. "I rather doubt it, given that she's the reason I'm darkening Dr Ware's doorstep."

The umbrella came down with a violent thump. “Sometimes I do believe you’re intentionally dense, Miss Bright.” Her brow folded in on itself, a great big wrinkle of disapproval. Her gaze flicked to Olive’s bicycle. “Pigeons are resting today, hmm?” she said, managing to infuse the question with disapproval.

“As a matter of fact, I’ve just seen Poppins off on the train with George.” Olive didn’t bother to hide her satisfaction, her smile daring the Sergeant Major to question the decision.

A grouchy sound elicited from behind tight lips. “I suppose she’s the best of all of them.” There was the barest hint of curiosity in the words, but it wasn’t truly a question.

“She’s my favourite,” Olive said stoutly.

“If she’s anything like her namesake, she’ll manage.” With a decisive thump of her umbrella, she turned away, adding over her shoulder, “Carry on, Miss Bright. And do let me know when she’s back.”

With Olive’s gaze trailing behind her, the older woman charged off down the lane. Feeling punchy, Olive saluted her retreating form. Such was the nature of her conversations with the Sergeant Major: maddening, with a twist. After a moment, she spun on her heel and rapped smartly at the door before nudging it open a crack. If Dr Ware was already in the shop, recovering from Miss Husselbee’s intrusion, perhaps Olive could engage him in a commiserating chat and casually hint her way around to picking up Harriet’s order early to save herself another trip.

“Hullo, Dr Ware,” she called sunnily.

“Yes, yes. Come in.” His tone was only mildly exasperated.

Not needing any further encouragement, Olive stepped into the neatly compartmentalised shop. As always, her eyes ranged rather giddily over the rows of carefully labelled bottles, jars, and canisters lining the back wall in a colourful assortment of blues and greens, then swept along the glass display cases and paused at the enormous mortar and pestle of Carrera marble and the tall druggist scales, both of which took pride of place on the wooden countertop. A quiet shuffle drew her eye farther back, into the

corner of the shop. Dr Ware was sitting at the little desk behind the counter, his spectacles only slightly askew, as he eyed her with weary patience. The table lamp gave his skin a sun-warmed, slightly jaundiced appearance and his eyes an artificial twinkle. In truth, he looked resigned and a trifle dishevelled, his papers gathered haphazardly into unwieldy stacks. She felt a twinge of guilt for interrupting him. He'd worked in the Department of Biochemistry at Oxford years ago, but to her, he was simply the village purveyor of throat lozenges, rose-petal lotion, and chocolate bars, even if they were in short supply these days. By the looks of things, he hadn't given up his research entirely.

"Good morning, Olive. I see you've survived the skirmish."

Meeting his sardonic gaze, she realised he was referring to her run-in with the Sergeant Major. "And lived to fight another day."

He rose and came around the desk and along the counter to stand across from her; he was only inches taller, but his broad shoulders seemed to fill the space. She smiled, noting the silk handkerchief in his shirt pocket and the gravy-coloured stain on his collar. His shirtsleeves were rolled to the elbow, exposing forearms covered with pale curly hair; and his hands, propped on the counter, were capped by nails bitten to the quick. "When she stormed out of here, I wondered who'd end up on the receiving end of her ire. I should apologise." With a sharp shake of his head, he pulled off his spectacles. He spared a moment to rub ruthlessly at his eyes before finally pulling his hand away to offer her a bleary smile.

"Of course you shouldn't," Olive insisted, feeling freshly guilty. He looked entirely spent, and the day had barely begun. "You're not even open yet, and we've pushed our way in. You've every right to be in a temper. I'm leaving right now so you can get back to your work." She glanced curiously toward the corner that was glowing in the lamplight.

He glanced backwards. "No need. My concentration is shot in any case." Distractedly, he plucked the handkerchief from his

pocket with the flair of a magician and rubbed its pink silk over the lenses of the spectacles he still held in his hand. He looked much younger without the owlish lenses, his grey eyes sharper, less distracted. It was as if a mole had nudged its way from the ground to stare blinking into the light of day. His age was a mystery, and Olive wondered suddenly whether he was old enough to avoid being called up. Perhaps the Sergeant Major had suspected he might be dodging his responsibility and had tried to press him for answers. Momentarily caught up in a nebulous conspiracy theory of her own making, she didn't see him slip his glasses back on or tuck away the handkerchief. "She was irritated with me. That's why she was behaving like a harridan."

Blinking herself back to reality, Olive ran her fingers over the polished wood trim of the display case, not wanting to be off just yet. "She can be quite insistent on getting her way, and seeing how difficult that is these days, I expect she's inclined to be more testy than usual." She flashed him a mischievous glance. "Don't tell me you were out of wart cream?"

"No, no. Fully stocked," he said, too distracted to realise the suggestion had been in jest. "It was answers she wanted, not remedies."

Olive nodded in understanding. "It must be extremely difficult to diagnose suspicious symptoms accurately." She suppressed a shudder at the very thought of Miss Husselbee's medical maladies.

He shook his head, somewhat flustered now. "No, no, nothing like that. And I couldn't possibly discuss other customers." He smiled awkwardly but took a step back from the counter, shoving his hands in his pockets. She heard the crinkle of paper, and he stilled, a hunted look in his eyes, as if he'd been caught out wearing a hairpiece. He promptly yanked his hands out again and busied himself straightening a box of combs on the counter. Curious now, Olive leaned confidently closer.

"She did say you were being entirely too secretive—" His

elbow jerked violently and collided with a depressingly empty canister of humbugs. They both reached to steady it, and Olive said quickly, "But don't worry. You're in good company. We're all doing our bit."

Now he really looked harried and eager to get away, but before she could speak, he remembered. "I have Mrs Bright's vitamins and anticoagulants right here." He turned, pulled open a drawer in the cabinet behind him, sorted through various paper bags, and retrieved one, which he handed over.

Sensing she was about to be shuffled out the door, she changed tack. "You look as if you could use a distraction, Dr Ware. Harriet tells me there's a dearth of male participation in the village play." She lifted her eyebrows, smiling encouragingly. "Perhaps you could . . ."

"I'm afraid not," he said, his tone now dismissive. "I've no time to spare. I wouldn't be suitable in any case. Have a good day, Olive." Before she could reply, he had moved to gather the stacks of paper that littered his desk, squeezed behind the little chair, and unlocked the door that stood just beyond it and led to the back room and his living quarters beyond. Without a backwards glance, he slipped through and tapped the door closed behind him.

Olive stared, blinking, after him, wondering if he was coming back. He'd left the door to the shop unlocked, and anyone could barge in at any moment—that should have been only too obvious.

"Thank you, Dr Ware," she called. "I'm sorry to have bothered you so early. I'll just let myself out."

No answer—not even a peep.

Was he hiding back there? From *her*? Much as it pained her to agree with Miss Husselbee, he *was* being oddly mysterious. Curiosity surfaced and swirled, but she tamped it forcibly down and stepped out of the shop into the steadily warming air of early morning. It was nothing to worry over and no business of hers. He was tired and flustered and feeling a touch pernickety—quite

rightly, too. The Sergeant Major had stuck her nose where it didn't belong and been thwarted for her troubles. In other words, it was business as usual in the village.

Except that George was gone.

Gripping the paper bag against the handlebars, she climbed onto her bicycle and was poised to push off when Henrietta Gibbons came around the corner, pulling a weathered blue trek cart whose wheels looked like they were holding on by sheer force of will. There was a pillowcase tucked into a corner of the cart, its folds tenting and shifting as if by invisible hands.

"You're out early, Hen," Olive said. "Doing your good deed for the day?"

Henrietta Gibbons, Girl Guide—as she'd taken to introducing herself to everyone she met—was an auburn-haired eleven-year-old with the manner of royalty, despite her homely nickname. She paused her progress.

"You could say that," she allowed.

Exasperated, Olive pressed, "Truthfully?"

The girl considered. "Is it still a good deed if you're getting paid?"

"Not *as* good."

She shrugged accommodatingly. "I've hours left to fit in a bona fide."

Olive's gaze flicked to the pillowcase. "Who's paying you, and for what?"

"Dr Ware wanted mice."

Olive frowned. "Why?"

"He didn't say. I didn't ask. But at two for a shilling, how could I refuse?" She glanced back over her shoulder. "I caught four." Her smile was one of delighted triumph.

Not feeling equal to the task of questioning her further, Olive said, "Well done, then," and walked on as Hen swept past to rap on the chemist's door. She wondered if the Sergeant Major knew about the mice.

She resumed her bicycle and coasted through the village. Her

eyes strayed unerringly toward the noticeboard, which was crowded with a calendar of events, various adverts, and the colourful placard that took pride of place. The Daffodil Dance was only two days away. The mere thought of it prompted Olive to start pedalling in earnest.

As she rode home, admiring the glorious spring green, she thought of her mother, who had been an ambulance driver in France during the Great War and had later died of tuberculosis. Olive couldn't imagine a life more tragically cut short. Her mother had been so vitally, fervently alive, flitting like a butterfly between projects and causes. She'd left her daughter to nurture her own independence, and Olive relished the chance to follow in her mother's marvellous wake. Serena Bright was a shining star, tireless and charming, but those very qualities often overwhelmed her. Then she would retreat to the dim privacy of her bedroom to face the merciless headaches that stole over her, and Olive would be dispatched to the chemist for her tablets. She'd spent countless hours lingering outside the door to her mother's room, hoping to be let in, but her mother was never anxious for her company. When Olive did see her, she was skittish and irritable, shirking the sunlight and drawn into herself. And as the months passed, and her mother began to slip away more and more, now quite dependent on her tablets, Olive took refuge in her memories. The sickness, when it came, seemed almost inevitable.

Olive was certain her mother would have appreciated her desire for a more active role in the war. A volunteer position that would put her on the front lines and engage her efforts in the defence of Britain. Or at least as close as was possible for a woman. She would have understood that Olive wasn't scared to go, but rather was afraid not to. Most of all, she'd know instinctively how best to convince Rupert Bright that this was what his daughter needed to do, despite his predictable misgivings. But Serena

Bright had been gone a long time, and Olive's stepmother was a different sort of woman entirely.

When her mother had been in the final, painful throes of her illness, the hospital had dispatched Harriet Vickers. Her brisk, efficient manner, cheery disposition, and indomitable spirit had been precisely what was needed, and by the time Serena Bright had slipped away, Olive and her father had become quite irrevocably attached. It had been only a matter of months before her father decided to marry again, and free of the long shadow cast by her mother, Olive had guiltily basked in the lustre of Harriet's warm accessibility. Resentments had flickered over the years—when Olive's memories would shift in favour of those long-ago crystal-bright days when the world had seemed to spin giddily around her mother—but they had quickly faded, like a cinema reel played out.

Harriet worked tirelessly for the war effort, but she had no aspirations, for herself or her stepdaughter, beyond the WI, and she likely wouldn't condone anything inherently risky. With the best of intentions, she might even tender a comparison between mother and daughter, prompting Olive's father to come stodgily down on the side of caution. As far as the ATS was concerned, Olive was very much on her own.

Long before coasting through the gate, she could hear the raucous chattering of the little birds in the hedgerows that bordered the lane. Her father had renamed the ancient hunting seat Black-cap Lodge, and Olive thought the new title suited the sprawling Tudor-style dwelling perfectly. It hinted at long-ago hunting parties, warm fires, adventurous rogues, and cosy bunk rooms. The reality, that it had been named for the little dark-headed warblers that came in situ, was irrelevant.

As if she'd conjured him, her father appeared right in front of her, a tall, barrel-chested man, his once blond hair silvering with the same grey that had lately begun to overrun the bushy tangle of his eyebrows. He stood beneath the blossoming cherry tree in

the side yard, scuffing mud off his boots while his Welsh corgi, Kíli, nosed in the hydrangea bushes. Hearing the crunch and pop of her wheels on gravel, the dog backed out of the shrubbery to trot in her direction.

“Coming or going?” she called to her father, sliding off the bike before it came to a full stop. She leaned down to rub behind the dog’s ears as its little nub of a tail twitched eagerly.

“Going, I’m sorry to say. A swollen fetlock takes precedence over a leisurely breakfast. As it should,” he added with a nod. “So, I’m off to the Donnelly farm. But Harriet would love some company, I’m sure.” He winked at her and squatted to rummage about in his surgeon’s bag, making certain he had everything he required.

Her stepmother would no doubt try to press her into spending the morning knitting, and she couldn’t bear it. Not today.

After a moment, he said distractedly, “George get off all right?”

Propping her bike against the side of the old barn he’d outfitted as a surgery, Olive pressed her lips together, nodding, relieved that the rawness of her emotions had scarred over a bit. She could blame only her distracted state of mind for the words that tumbled out on the next breath. “I sent Poppins with him.”

Her father straightened, his brow furrowed in confusion. “You’re not serious . . . ?”

She squirmed, wishing she hadn’t said anything. He probably wouldn’t have noticed, anyway. Poppins was one of her pigeons, and with racing postponed for the duration of the war, she’d taken full charge of the loft.

“I didn’t want him to have to go off alone . . .” Her voice sounded irritatingly sullen.

He rubbed a rough hand over his face before pinning her with a glare. “Are you out of your bloomin’ mind?” His face began to redden as exasperation fired his blood. With a muttered curse, he began to pace, prompting Kíli to respond with a choreographed

crouch-and-bounce ballet, which was generally ignored. “What if the Pigeon Service picks today to visit? How do you imagine they’ll take to the news that you’ve sent one of our best racers out on a lark?” Before Olive could respond, he roared, “Quit that, you ill-mannered brute!” The dog had apparently nipped his fingertip, hoping for a bit of attention. Even now, the squat little thing wasn’t cowed, well aware that Rupert Bright’s bark was much worse than his bite.

The Pigeon Service was no doubt well aware of the same; they simply couldn’t be bothered to tolerate either. But she couldn’t very well say that.

“None of this is a game, Olive,” her father said, shooting a disapproving glance in her direction. His eyes were tired, and his face had thinned over the past year, the skin having slackened at his cheekbones and jaw, which was currently roughly shaven and grim.

“I know that!” She nearly shouted the words, unable to stop herself. “How can you think I don’t know that? He went off this morning, one step closer to taking his turn against those hateful Nazis, and there’s every chance that one day soon he’ll be shot right out of the sky . . .” The last word crumpled out of her. She clipped her mouth shut, fighting down the lump that had returned, noticeably bigger than before, to the base of her throat.

His manner changing abruptly from ferocious disapproval to brusque understanding, her father stepped toward her, placed his hands on her rigid shoulders. “You mustn’t think like that, Olive. George wouldn’t want you to think like that.” Reaching up to run the pad of his thumb over her cheek, he added, “What on earth’s happened to your fighting spirit, my dear?”

“I suppose the knitting and gardening aren’t keeping it particularly sharp.” She sounded mulish, even to her own ears. “I’m sure it’ll be back on track soon enough,” she added cryptically, determined to speak to him that very evening.

“You always did want to be smack in the centre of things,” he

said softly. “Just like your mother. Sometimes, my dear, it’s more courageous to be the one left behind.”

Olive searched his face, wondering if there was more to that quiet certitude than was prompted by this particular moment.

“Now, don’t go telling the pigeons I said that.” His ruddy cheeks rounded in amusement at his little joke, and she turned to glance wistfully towards the dovecote, which was standing sentry a little ways from the house, like a turret displaced from the top of a castle wall. Hexagonal in shape, ringed with leaded-glass windows, and crowned with a cupola, it was ridiculously fanciful. But it was equipped with everything the birds could want. Even now, three of the creatures were sunning on perches high above the ground, their quizzical, intelligent eyes scanning the spring-softened countryside. She wondered ruefully if they spied any errant NPS officials.

“They’re not coming,” she said, her tone flat. She hadn’t voiced her suspicions even to George, but the reality had been worrying her for some time. “Too much time has passed.”

Her father immediately understood, making her wonder if he’d come to the same conclusion on his own. “I’ve offered,” he huffed, dropping his hands. “I can’t very well help it if the National Pigeon Service doesn’t appreciate the sort of standard we adhere to. It’s why we’re champions, by God.” His voice built to a crescendo but quickly calmed as his gaze skimmed her face. “I suspect the War Office will put a bit of pressure on the NPS before too long. The situation is too critical.” He wrung his hands distractedly. “The Bright loft is known for fast, smart birds with good instincts and fighting spirit.”

“I know,” she said, the tightness in her chest loosening slightly. She was suddenly desperate for a cup of tea. “So, you can understand why I couldn’t help but send one with George. He’ll be sending her home soon enough, but it makes my mind easier, knowing she’s with him.”

He was silent for a moment before absently patting her on the

arm. “Yes, well. Don’t lose hope, Olive. They’ll come. You’ll see.” He glanced sternly down at Kíli and hoisted his surgeon’s bag before adding, “I’d best get on with things. You go in and eat your breakfast. See if you can bring yourself to knit a sock or two.” He winked at her and walked down the drive, whistling for the dog, who went hurtling after him, churning up a low trail of dust.

With a deep sigh, Olive skirted the barn and slipped under the lacy pink overhang of the cherry tree, shortcutting the path to the dovecote. After retrieving the key from its uninspired hiding place beneath a large moss-covered stone, she unlocked the door and stepped into the dim interior, with its familiar earthy tang.

As she tipped her head back to admire the pale sunbeams filtering in through the pigeonholes far up in the cupola, a little flicker of warmth kindled in her chest. “Good morning, Bright young things.” Corny it might be, but it always made her smile. She lifted the heavy lid on the bin of pigeon feed and stared down at the ever-dwindling supply. With the bulk of crops reserved for human consumption, there was little available maize, peas, wheat, or barley left for pigeons. What there was had been reserved for lofts that had been vetted by the Pigeon Service to provide birds for the war effort.

Scooping some feed into the long, shallow trough on the floor near the far wall, she glanced up at the numbered nesting boxes tucked into the lime-washed walls, wondering if the birds had any sense of how dire their situation was becoming. A svelte white hen with red-rimmed eyes scrutinised her from a box at eye level. “You needn’t look at me like that, Queenie. I’m doing everything I can.” The hen was clearly reserving judgment, and Olive wished she could offer something more definitive, but this was war, and certainty was as common as citrus—which was to say there was none to be had. She hadn’t tasted—or even glimpsed—an orange in months.

“Rest up,” she said, encouragingly, replacing the scoop and

sealing the bin of food. As her gaze ranged over the dovecote's inhabitants, her thoughts flashed back to the fairy tales she'd devoured as a girl. Here they all were, locked away in a tower, waiting to be saved. Well, in truth, they were waiting for a chance to do their bit in this war. She snorted, startling a young grey that had wafted closer, likely ready to eat. "We don't need a hero, ladies and gents," she said briskly. "Because we are going to save ourselves."

After giving them all a jaunty nod, she walked through the door, pulled it closed behind her, and relocked it with the key. As she dropped the key back into its hiding place, she murmured quietly to herself, "I just need to figure out *how* exactly we're going to do that."

Chapter 2

Thursday, 1st May

“**Y**ou’re not the sort of girl who lets herself feel helpless, Olive. And certainly not hopeless.”

Olive started, her gaze flicking to the lemon-yellow chaise in the corner and the piccrust table beside it, against which leaned a polished cherrywood cane. The room had been empty when she’d slipped inside, not quite ready for breakfast or company. As she’d stared blindly out through the parlour’s French doors, into the back garden, gently raking her nails over a neatly embroidered pillow and thinking hard, her stepmother had made her cumbersome way to the chaise, arranged herself comfortably, and turned on the wireless. Olive now realised it had been droning on about what to eat and how to prepare it for some time. It felt as if she’d managed to squeeze an entire day’s worth of emotions into the two hours since she’d crawled out of bed.

“George is doing his duty, and you can do no less,” Harriet said, clasping her fingers over the pearl affixed to her earlobe. Her stepmother, Olive knew, spoke from experience. She’d long managed the Bright household with high spirits and brisk efficiency, but lately her condition had demanded she carry on from a windowed corner of the parlour with her favoured ruby-red

afghan draped over her legs. Her tiresome battle with multiple sclerosis, long manageable and unchanging, seemed as if it might now be beginning in earnest.

“It’s not at all fair that women are always the ones left behind,” she continued, dropping her pen into the cradle of the book open on her lap, “but I like to think it’s because we are more steadfast, willing to carry out all the little jobs that are entirely necessary but quite beneath the notice of most men.”

Harriet’s sable hair was styled in an impeccable chignon, the shock of white near her right temple giving the style a rakish, modern flair. Paired with the clever glint lurking amid her calm grey eyes, and the wry twist of rose-coloured lips, her entire demeanour exuded self-sufficiency, giving not the slightest indication of her ever-expanding need for assistance. Olive’s decision to step into the fray was not without its pitfalls. How would Harriet manage without her? And what of the pigeons? She’d be going against her father’s wishes, and Jonathon would once again be left behind.

As the wireless marched on in its programme schedule to *Take Your Choice*, a medley of music from records pulled seemingly at random, Olive couldn’t help the sigh that escaped her.

Harriet suddenly reached out, and her hand fumbled with the catch of the jade enamelled box on the little picrust table. Inside, Olive knew, was a neat little phalanx of cigarettes. Mostly they remained untouched—in reserve—until her stepmother’s defences were down, her nerves particularly frayed, or her symptoms depressingly debilitating. The paper bag from the chemist sat where Olive had left it, crinkled and ignored on the table, beside the little box.

“The best thing you can do now is carry on, keep busy, and have faith that every effort, no matter how small, is helping the cause. And to that end,” she began, her lips curving into a mischievous smile that didn’t quite match the harried look in her eyes, “I’ve put your name in for the WI’s latest undertaking. It

was unanimously agreed that your veterinary expertise made you an ideal candidate to chair this particular scheme.” As Olive digested this news, Harriet selected a cigarette and flicked her elegant gold lighter to flame.

Olive opened her mouth to protest her suitability, given that she had every intention of going off to join the ATS, then popped it closed again. No one knew her plans. Now, more than ever, it had become imperative that she speak to her father the moment he got home. She’d simply have to stave off her stepmother’s expectations until then.

Oblivious to the warring thoughts tumbling about in Olive’s head, Harriet had closed her eyes to enjoy the first few puffs of her cigarette. As they fluttered open again, she said, “Having refused a part in the play, I decided you’d have plenty of time to be in charge of the Pibley pig club we’re starting.”

Olive nearly scoffed. Harriet had basically volunteered her to raise an indeterminate number of piglets for the sole purpose of supplementing the village ration. It would be a grim job of mud, manure, and pig slop that eventually led to butchering. “*Marvelous*,” she agreed, wondering if Harriet was paying close enough attention to register the ringing tones of sarcasm.

“See, you *do* have a flare for the dramatic. You would have been wonderful in our little production of *Pride and Prejudice*.” She spared a wry glance for Olive, then turned to look out into the garden. Her fingers, so often busy turning balls of yarn into socks, were now still, a mere prop for her cigarette. Olive ran her fingers over the legs of her trousers, her thoughts in a dizzying pendulum of go-stay.

No longer able to sit still in the silence, she stood abruptly and crossed to the doors to let in some fresh air. She leaned against the doorjamb, relishing the feel of sunlight streaming across her face. It had been a long, cold winter.

“Violet Darling came off the train this morning,” she said, without turning.

“Did she indeed?” The response was appreciatively stilted, a full measure of curiosity infused into every word.

Miss Violet’s recent years may well have been shrouded in mystery, but her younger sister, Miss Rose, was a veritable open book, a particularly apt comparison given that she happened to be the village librarian. The sisters were in their thirties, only a decade or so older than Olive, but she’d used the honorific since childhood, and it was second nature now. Over the years, the story of the Darling sisters had been much discussed, altered, and exaggerated until it resembled a tale worthy of Hans Christian Andersen.

Unable or unwilling to manage the pair of them when their mother died, their father, Maverick Darling, promptly sent for his sister, their aunt Felicity. Cast as the evil stepmother of the story, she was consumed by her own maladies and comforts and was ill equipped to care for two young girls, leaving them to take refuge in books. Miss Rose turned to classic literature, while Miss Violet found immense pleasure in lurid novels and thrillers of all sorts.

Over the years, their reading material informed their behaviour. Rose grew into a quiet, intellectual young lady devoted to her books, while Violet could best be described as a rambunctious pleasure seeker who was entirely too friendly with too many boys. Hoping to head off what she imagined was the impending ruin of a well-bred young lady, Miss Husselbee (the fairy godmother of the tale, at least by her own estimation) took Violet to task. Or tried to. Violet ignored her outright and flagrantly carried on. Enter Emory Hammond, the charmingly handsome, sun-kissed stepson of Lord Murchison, whose estate bordered Miss Husselbee’s. He came to stay the summer after Olive turned twelve—Harriet’s first summer in Pibley—and made a habit of driving his snappy little motor car through the village and over the hills at dangerous speeds, the wind whipping through his hair, the sun glinting off his roguish smile. He’d wave

jauntily at the poor unfortunates he left in his wake, and Olive couldn't help but wave fiendishly back. He was not at all what he should be, or so she was told. No doubt that was precisely why she developed the most awful crush on him and was devastated when she discovered that Violet Darling had lured him away.

The two ran off together in late August of that year and had been absent from their lives ever since. It was well known that Violet had made a name for herself writing the sort of lurid novels she'd enjoyed as a girl, and the gossips were quick to surmise that her own story did *not* have a happily ever after. In fact, the theories of the pair's whereabouts tended to be laced with grim tragedy: sunk on a transatlantic crossing, dismembered by a lion in Africa—or a tiger in India—fated to live a dusty, forgotten existence in Australia or the American West. The appearance of a new novel every few years did nothing to stifle the conjecture. But now, here was Violet Darling, home again. Or rather, Violet Hammond. Where Emory might be was anyone's guess.

"Leave it to Violet Darling," Harriet said, in quiet appreciation. Olive shifted to face her stepmother, waiting for the rest of this ambiguous statement. Harriet blinked, realising she had a rapt audience, and switched her cigarette to her left hand, then took up her pen in her right. "She's swooped in to save us feeling sorry for ourselves. Now we'll all feel superior instead," she said wryly. She tapped her pen against the book, considering. "I don't suppose I should ask her to play Kitty or Lydia—that might set us off on the wrong foot. But perhaps Elizabeth? Dare I risk the scandal?" Harriet had been tasked with the thankless job of writing a workable script and assigning the much-loved and much-loathed roles to willing participants. Olive suspected the resultant squabbles could very well outlast the war.

There was a step in the hall, and Jonathon appeared, coming through from the kitchen. But he lingered on the threshold, one last mouthful of breakfast keeping him silent as his jaw worked in earnest.

He was of medium height, the crown of his head coming to Olive's chin. But she was tall, and judging by his lanky frame, he had a good bit of growing yet to do. His dark hair, while neat, was in need of a trim, and his eyes, a coppery brown, seemed always to be warring between darting curiosity and wary uncertainty. Barely there freckles marched straight over the bridge of his nose, and his smile, when it flashed, exposed teeth that were slightly too big. He was wearing a school blazer, a maroon jumper, and navy short trousers that exposed all manner of cuts and scrapes.

"Good morning, Jonathon," Harriet chirped, her smile edging out the distracted arrangement of her features.

"Morning, Harriet," came the quiet reply, and Olive watched as a tinge of pink crested the tips of his ears as he came farther into the room. Her nose twitched at the scent that clung to him, and she raised a hand, to lay it lightly against the lower part of her face, as if in quiet contemplation.

Jonathon Maddocks had been living at Blackcap Lodge for nearly four months—he'd come just after the new year. And while he had made new school chums in the village and was a natural with the pigeons, he still seemed skittish at home, as if he believed one false step would mean a second relocation on the heels of his first.

His arrival had taken all of them by surprise. With his father away in North Africa, his mother, a flighty school chum of Harriet's, had been utterly overwhelmed and had promptly packed her twelve-year-old son off to Pibley for the duration while she retreated to a private sanatorium in the Scottish Highlands. And despite their best efforts to make him feel welcome, Jonathon clung to his quiet shyness. In a flash of inspiration, Harriet had given him responsibility over their victory garden, such as it was, and he'd taken to the task with gusto. He'd managed to charm every gardener in the village with knowledge to share, and Olive had high hopes of surplus produce and a splendid variety in the months to come.

Olive had quickly found she quite liked having Jonathon around. With Lewis gone—and now George—he was her most constant companion. “No complaints from Miss Fen or your schoolmates on the lingering effects of your morning activities?”

His brow furrowed. “I’m only stirring the compost.”

“Never mind,” she said, guessing his teacher was too polite to comment. Olive had kept away from the back corner of the garden ever since Jonathon had begun feeding the towering heap as assiduously as if it were a pet dragon. “Anything to report? Hints of an onion, maybe?”

“Not yet,” he said, a mischievous light flickering in his eyes. “But I do have a few surprises up my sleeves.” He paused, but it was clear he wanted to say more, and after a moment, it came flooding out of him in an excited rush. “Hen and I went foraging yesterday and met a Land Girl called Iris Wells, who said that she and two others are digging up the tennis lawn at Peregrine Hall to put in a whopper of a vegetable garden.” Not even wanting to stop for breath, he sucked in reserves and barrelled on. “Hen and I plan to go round to see Miss Husselbee after school to ask if we can help.” Pride and purpose shone on his face, lifted his chin, straightened his spine.

Hen had attached herself to Jonathon the moment he’d stepped off the train from London as an official evacuee. Ostensibly, she was following Guide protocol, showing him around and making him feel at home, but Hen invariably had ulterior motives. Olive recognised the intrepid look in the girl’s clear green eyes. Her own mirror had reflected a similar glint each morning, before she’d fetched George from his father’s garage and they’d set off together on the day’s adventures. Hen may have been a year younger than Jonathon, but her wing, it seemed, was already sufficiently capacious, as he’d been quickly and efficiently hustled under it. Olive had yet to hear him complain; George hadn’t, either.

“Well, that sounds quite promising,” Harriet allowed, before

adding, "However, I don't want you to get your hopes up. Miss Husselbee can be a bit . . ." She glanced to Olive for assistance.

"Prickly?" Olive supplied. *Suspicious*, she thought, thinking of Dr Ware. "Uncharitable?" She was warming to her theme.

"That's plenty. Thank you." Harriet's cultured tones smoothed over the slightest pettiness, a quality that made her a godsend to the WI.

"She's all right," Jonathon said, shoving his hands into his pockets. "She gave me a cutting from a broad bean plant trailing up the wall of her kitchen garden. I've planted it beside the sweet peas, and it's shooting right up." He picked at a loose bit of skin on his thumb. "Besides, she's already promised us some paper for our salvage collection. We need to go by and pick it up."

Olive had a sudden thought. "If the lime gravel border is going, as well, perhaps she'd let you collect a cartful for the pigeons. They're getting short on grit and will need it more than ever if they're left to forage for seeds." Olive spoke lightly, not wishing to dwell on the pigeons any more than she already had.

"And if it happens that Miss Husselbee doesn't need you," Harriet said cheerily, "Olive might like your help with her new endeavour." Jonathon tilted his head curiously. "She's to head up our pig club."

"A *pig* club," Jonathon said blankly, eyes wide. "Golly, how did you get suckered into that?"

The question was spared an answer by another sliding step in the hall. They turned as one toward the doorway, through which Mrs Battlesby shortly appeared, feather duster raised to swipe the lintels. "If you're having breakfast, Miss Olive, you'd best get on before I do the washing-up," she said with a wink.

The housekeeper had a mild tick, whereby her right eyelid occasionally, inadvertently, closed for a long blink, a motion indistinguishable from a wink. Rather confusingly, she also tended to make pointed comments, which she capped off with a knowing wink from the same eye. As a result, people were forever ponder-

ing the intention of that fleetingly closed eye, while Mrs B remained entirely oblivious.

Brisk and brown-eyed, her hair a tumble of frizzing brown curls fading to grey, Mrs Battlesby handled the cooking and cleaning, and various other assorted jobs that none of the rest of them took an interest in, and managed to be done in time to walk back home in the afternoon to repeat the same manner of tasks in the cottage she shared with her husband, Archie Battlesby, a veteran of the Great War, who'd never fully recovered from the tendrils of mustard gas that had seeped down into his trench. Mostly, he kept to himself, but as a member of the Home Guard, he'd lately been spending his time preparing the village and its environs for the possibility of a German invasion. Olive had always found him brusque to the point of rudeness, and he had a disconcerting habit of following a person's movements with only his eyes—like the subject of a baleful portrait painting in a Gothic novel. She found it unsettling in the extreme.

“Coming, Mrs B,” she said, not wishing to miss her share of bacon, no matter how meagre it was sure to be. Breakfast was rather a pale shadow of its former self now that rationing limited a second helping of bacon and a truly decadent slather of butter and jam, but the limits on tea were particularly maddening. As far as Olive was concerned, the tragic situation of teatime on rations would have been reason enough to go to war if Chamberlain hadn't already engaged them.

“When you're ready for school,” Olive said to Jonathon, “I'll walk with you. I'm meeting Margaret to write letters to the Friendless Serving Men, and I've offered to help decorate the hall for the dance.” Normally, she was gung-ho for any sort of village entertainment—it was a much-needed break from the tedium when so many other simple pleasures had been stripped away. But now things would be different. With both of them perpetually unattached, she and George had always paired up for the dances, any romantic curiosity between them having been

summarily squelched by a single kiss three years ago and the resultant snorting laughter. Clearly, she was going to have to get used to going alone.

This particular dance was a tradition in the village, held every year on the first Friday in May, when wild daffodils carpeted the neighbouring woods and trailed along the hedgerows, a profusion of sunny faces popping open to welcome spring. When she was younger, she and the other girls had woven the flowers into crowns with twists of ivy and lengths of ribbon; they'd stuffed themselves with cakes and punch, then whirled until their dresses frothed around them. Exhausted, they'd trail home after their families under a star-filled heaven, the whole world heady with the scent of spring. Her mother had loved any excuse to get dressed up; she was lovely and charismatic and always the centre of attention.

"Olive?" Harriet's voice filtered through her memories, and Olive blinked, coming back to the moment—the reality that nothing was the same as it had once been. With a wrinkle of concern now marring her brow, Harriet shifted forward. "If you're passing the library, do stop in and tell Rose I'm very much looking forward to meeting her sister. Perhaps you could casually suggest that the Darling sisters are perfectly suited to play a pair of Bennet sisters." Her eyes twinkled with mischief as her shoulders dropped back onto the chaise.

Olive shot her a look of exasperation. She was happy to run errands, balking only when they involved an element of cajolery on behalf of her stepmother's schemes. "Fine, but only because I have a *legitimate* reason for stopping." She pushed off the doorjamb and elaborated as she crossed the room to follow Mrs Battlesby back to the kitchen. "Monsieur Poirot unmasked the murderer in *Death on the Nile* last night, so it's on to the next case."

It had been Miss Husselbee who'd introduced Olive to Agatha Christie's Belgian detective. The Sergeant Major had taken *Peril at End House* from the library and not cared a jot for the antics of

“that frivolous little man,” so when Olive, fresh home from London and rather dispirited, had made a pest of herself with the toys being sorted for the jumble sale, Miss Husselbee had pushed the book into her hands and shooed her away. Olive had taken herself off to the churchyard and had read for hours in the shelter of the old yew tree. When the shadows had grown too long and even squinting hadn’t been sufficient to make out the words, she’d tucked the book into her pocket and walked home through the village, looking askance at everyone she passed, her thoughts crowded with suspicion.

Unlike Miss Husselbee, Olive found she had rather a soft spot for M. Poirot: his unflinching determination to do what must be done, tempered by his many little absurdities—those moustaches! She had quickly caught up on all his adventures to date and was now working her way through them all over again, trying to pinpoint the clues that would eventually lead to the gathering of suspects and the thrilling unmasking of the murderer. Poirot was by far her favourite of Mrs Christie’s clever sleuths, although the back-and-forth shenanigans of Frankie and Bobby in *Why Didn’t They Ask Evans?* made Olive sentimental for past adventures with George.

Harriet was well aware of her stepdaughter’s penchant and often teased her about her little Belgian friend. Now her eyes rolled in amused exasperation as another wisp of smoke escaped her. “You hardly need a book, darling—we have our own little mystery right here.”

Olive stopped in her tracks. “What is it?”

Harriet cut her eyes around at her stepdaughter. “Where has Violet Darling been all this time? Where is her husband? And perhaps most interesting of all, why has she come back?”

“I suspect the answers are rather straightforward and won’t require an investigation or prompt a murder. So, I’ll need to live vicariously,” Olive said wryly. “Oh,” she said, turning back, “you’ll need to find another Mr Darcy. Dr Ware is too busy.”

“And I was so hoping he’d agree,” Harriet said consideringly, already deep in thought, as Olive reached the doorway.

As the wireless switched to the jaunty harmonising of the Andrews Sisters, Harriet called after her, “And if you could drop the spare accumulator at Forrester’s Garage, I’d be ever so grateful. Thank you, darling.”

Olive groaned inwardly.

Olive had carted the family’s spare accumulator to Forrester’s to be recharged at least once a week since the war had started. No one—least of all her increasingly immobile stepmother—wanted the wireless to fall silent. But for once, she barely noticed the twinge in her shoulder as the battery dragged at her side; she was distracted by a new, burgeoning sense of responsibility, a fierce impatience to get on with things. It was as if, with George leaving, the clock had begun to spin faster, its ticking becoming louder and more insistent, a persistent reminder that it was high time she volunteered. Officially. Doing real work, making a solid contribution to help win the war. The trouble was, she felt tethered to Pibley like a barrage balloon.

Sighing, she took a moment to appreciate the beauty of Hertfordshire in the spring. The greys and browns of winter had, at long last, been vanquished by a downy blanket of spring green, speckled with the sunny yellow of daffodils and the luminous violet of wild bluebells. It was good to remember that life carried on—all the best parts of it—even when it seemed as if hope was gradually giving way.

The insistent buzz of an aeroplane sounded suddenly in the companionable silence, putting Olive instantly on alert. Moving closer to Jonathon, poised to take his arm, Olive braced for the possibility of an air-raid siren. It didn’t come. Instead, they stood still, watching one of their own, a Vickers Wellington, bisect the sky above them, heading west.

“Now that George has gone”—Jonathon’s already quiet voice

was dampened further by the drone of the engines far above them—“are you planning on leaving, too?”

She looked at him—he very deliberately wasn’t looking at her—and her shoulders dropped.

“I think I need to,” she said quietly. “Don’t you? It’s a joint effort, after all, and I’m not contributing here, not really.” In fairness, every one of her responsibilities *could* be taken up by someone else, whether it be her father, Jonathon, Mrs Battlesby, or the women of the WI. It wouldn’t be convenient, and it would likely not be easy, but it could be done. As things were, she was entirely dispensable.

He was silent. No empty protestations for the sake of her feelings.

Bear up, Olive. You wouldn’t want that in any case.

“You won’t even miss me,” she said, bumping his shoulder with hers. “Too much to keep you busy. You’ll have to care for the pigeons, you know. Or do the best you can, anyway.” She’d write a letter, requesting that the Bright loft be given fresh consideration, but beyond that, it was out of their hands.

Jonathon turned toward her, his face slack with worry.

She gave his shoulders an encouraging squeeze, the string bag that held her library book bumping gently against his arm. “And don’t worry about this business with the NPS. Pigeons are extremely resourceful. With you watching over them, they’re bound to do just fine.”

They had reached the edge of the village now and were walking along the river, the chattering redwings in the nearby hedgerow volubly conducting business of their own.

“Maybe you’ll be posted to one of the services stationed nearby.” Jonathon sounded optimistic, and she couldn’t blame him. He was a protective, sensitive soul and was liable to worry if he couldn’t keep an eye on her himself.

Olive thought it best to shy away from the honest answer, that she rather hoped to be posted somewhere a bit more dangerous,

and was poised to agree with him as she switched the battery to her other hand. But in that in-between moment, a high, crisp voice reached their ears, coming from the other side of the brick wall that edged the riverbank, just over the footbridge.

“You cannot possibly think to hide this information from the vicar.”

Bafflement stole over Olive’s face as she strained to hear the response. Unfortunately, she had no luck discerning individual words amid the whisper-hissed reply. Given that it prompted a familiar, cracking thump, it seemed unlikely to be accommodating.

“That’s Miss Husselbee,” Jonathon said in hushed tones redolent of both respect and uncertainty.

Having been the cause of that umbrella thump that very morning, she nodded in recognition and tried to decide what to do. Should they stay put and risk eavesdropping on a private, and very awkward, conversation, or walk on and risk a direct confrontation?

“It is very much my business,” Miss Husselbee began again, forestalling any decision on Olive’s part. “A person’s sordid past is the business of any good citizen.” Another punctuating thump.

Olive’s eyes flared as she wondered whom Miss Husselbee might have cornered with such an accusation. *Sordid past?* Her mind boggled.

“What’s *sordid?*” Jonathon had leaned in so close that his breath tickled her ear.

“Shameful.” They shared a look.

“Golly,” he said, subdued.

The second voice, lashing out, louder now, shook them still. “For once in your tedious little life, mind your own business.”

Olive took hold of Jonathon’s arm; she knew that voice.

Miss Husselbee naturally ignored the suggestion. “I knew the moment you set foot in the village that you’d be trouble, and it’s rare that I’m mistaken.”

“You know *nothing* about me,” came the scathing retort, “and you had better not spread your spy-gathered stories any further.”

“Don’t presume to threaten me, young lady. Only one of us can claim the moral high ground, and it certainly isn’t you.”

“How is it,” the voice said tightly, “that you’ve not yet been murdered in your bed?”

Olive and Jonathon stood rigid with shock, as if listening to the latest instalment of *Lights Out*.

Olive could well imagine the rolling of Miss Husselbee’s hazel eyes. “Leave it to you to be melodramatic about the whole affair. I have found you out, and it is my duty to ensure that you do not deceive someone who has placed his trust in you.”

“Stay away from him, or I’ll—” The words were bitten off: either her plans were too unspeakable to utter or she hadn’t yet settled on a punishment worthy of such a betrayal.

Judging by the frosty harrumph, the older woman wasn’t cowed and had simply walked on.

Caught in the middle of a secret half revealed, Olive was fretting and distracted when Jonathon tugged her sleeve. As they stepped onto the bridge, a woman had emerged from behind the wall and was quickly turning away to walk briskly in the opposite direction. Olive stared after her, her thoughts echoing Jonathon’s quiet words: *It’s Margaret*.