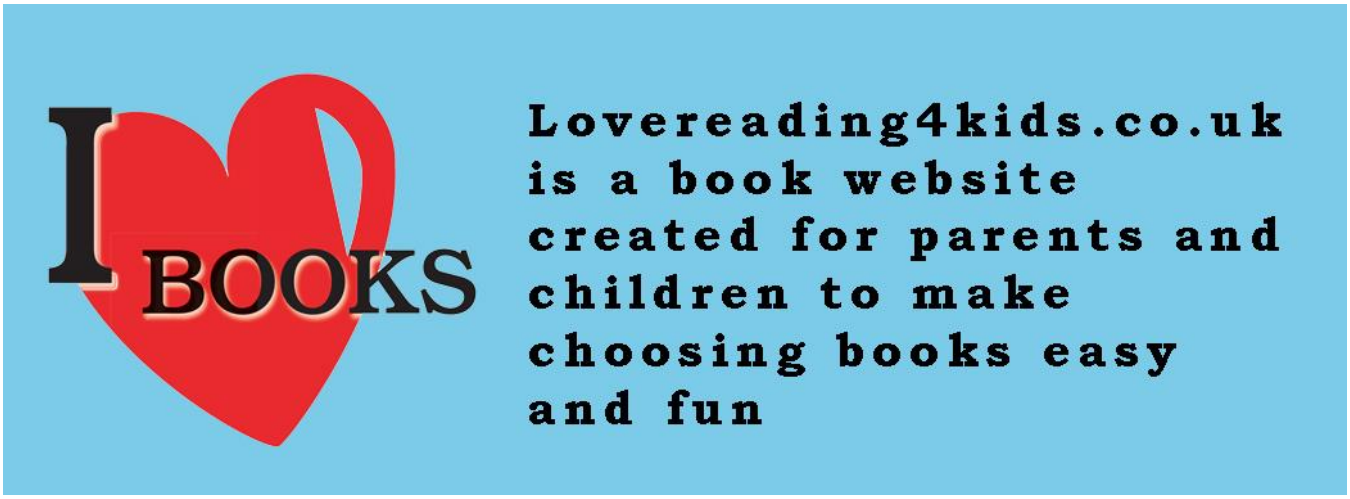


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KEEP CALM AND CARRY ON

We were halfway through the news when the air raid started. It was a Friday in January: we were at the Picture Palace for the 6 p.m. showing of *The Mark of Zorro*. All month the Luftwaffe had been attacking us, their bombs falling on London like pennies from a jar, so the fact they couldn't hold off for just a few measly hours made me hate the Germans that little bit more.

The cinema trip had been my sister Sukie's idea, as most things were. We were all in need of cheering up that evening: after the tea we'd just eaten at home it was a wonder we were still alive.

'It's like brains,' Cliff, my eight-year-old brother, said, lifting the pan lid to show us. It was probably only minced meat and potatoes, but you never knew with Mum's dinners, especially the ones you had to reheat when she was working late. And Cliff relished gory details, being the sort who'd pick scabs off his knee just to see what was underneath.

'Well, you *never* get scabby knees, Olive,' he once said to me, like it was the biggest character flaw in the world. The truth was I preferred reading books to running about in the street. I didn't see it as a weakness, either.

But we had to eat the horrid supper, of course. No one chucked food away with a war on, not even stuff that resembled brains. You simply pinched your nose and swallowed hard, then glugged down a glass of water. Afterwards, Sukie, being the eldest and in charge, said we deserved a trip out. She'd already seen the film last week with a friend.

'It's the cat's pyjamas. You'll both love it!' she gushed, as we went around the house closing the blackout curtains. Then to me, teasingly: 'Cheer up. It's going to be fun!'

People were always telling me I had a serious face, because I was dark and thoughtful-looking like my dad. What they really meant was I wasn't as pretty as Sukie, and I didn't mind because I was proud of my big sister, not jealous. She was just as marvellous on the inside – everyone seemed to think so.

'Is that better?' I beamed up at Sukie so she could tell how thrilled I was to be going out, especially with her. We didn't see nearly enough of her any more. She'd recently got a penpal and acted mysterious when

letters postmarked 'Devon' arrived addressed to her. We'd all guessed who she was writing to: our next-door neighbour Gloria had a younger sister called Queenie, who was nineteen and lived in Devon. Having a penpal was, according to Sukie, all the rage.

And like she was with anything new, Sukie threw herself into it, kicking off her office shoes each night after work, then disappearing to her room to write. It wasn't the same as when we'd sent letters to Dad, where we each got to add our own line on the official blue army paper. Sukie shut her door on us. These were her letters – hers and Queenie's. I often wondered what they had to say to each other that was so private, and took up so much time.

Once we'd got our coats and grabbed our gas masks from where they hung in the hallway, we were ready for the cinema. It was a cold, damp evening and we were all done up in woolly hats and scarves. Cliff's mittens, on string threaded through his coat, dangled limp at the end of his sleeves, and he flapped them like wings to make me laugh.

Such was my excitement, I didn't think to ask why Sukie was buttoning up Mum's best green checked coat rather than her own. She'd done her hair different too, curled like a film star's, and was wearing postbox-red

lipstick. It made her look older than seventeen and rather like Mum – the Mum before Dad died, who'd styled her hair and worn make-up and could argue for England.

*

By the time we reached the Picture Palace, the lights were already dimming. We'd only just found our seats – Row K, plush velvet that prickled the backs of your knees – when the great maroon curtains swung apart with a squeak.

First up was the newsreel. Every film show started like this, with five minutes of news from home and abroad. It was all very upbeat, with a proper English voice telling us everything would be all right, even if the film footage showed bombsites and battlefields. I watched eagerly, chin in hand, as the big white titles and the word 'Pathé' filled the screen.

Sukie, though, leaped to her feet.

'Stay here,' she whispered to us. 'If I'm not back in two minutes, meet me in the foyer when the film's over.'

Just like that she disappeared.

'She needs the lav,' Cliff said knowingly. 'That supper's giving her grief.'

'You're disgusting, you are,' I replied, not taking my

eyes from the newsreel. The footage was of men in RAF uniforms walking across an airfield. Immediately, it made me think of Dad.

In August last year we'd had a telegram from the War Office, telling us Dad's plane had been shot down over France. Six long months had passed, of every day hearing someone in my family crying, and Mum getting sadder and thinner. I couldn't sleep through a whole night any more. Often I barely slept at all.

'Look for the light,' Dad used to say when things were difficult.

I did try. He'd died for his country, people said. He was a hero. Watching the news helped me believe this was true, and as I listened to what a mightily fine job 'our boys' were doing, I could feel myself filling up with pride.

Tonight's news switched from RAF men to a city somewhere abroad – I didn't catch where. The footage showed hungry-looking people queuing for food, flanked either side by soldiers. There was snow on the ground. The people in line wore star-shaped badges on their coats.

Watching, I began to feel uncomfortable instead of proud. The Pathé news voice – jolly and brisk – jarred with what I was seeing. These people weren't just hungry but *scared*. I could tell by their faces how

desperate they were, and it made me horribly guilty for the fuss we'd made about our supper.

Abruptly, the film stopped. The lights came up.

I blinked at the announcement on the screen:

AIR RAID IN PROGRESS.
PLEASE LEAVE THE THEATRE IMMEDIATELY.
HEAD TO THE NEAREST SHELTER.

'Blast it,' I said, reaching for my coat and gas mask. 'Come on, Cliff, we'd better find Sukie.'

People began to leave, though not very quickly. All around us seats thudded as they flipped upright. Coats were shaken out, hats pinned in place. There was a fair bit of complaining going on too.

'Should we ask for our money back?' asked Cliff.

'What?' I was still half thinking of those poor people in the newsreel. 'Oh, we'll ask Sukie. Keep hold of my hand.'

Weaving through the crowds we headed for the foyer. It was then the seriousness of our situation sank in. Beginning to worry, I told myself this was no different from any other raid – and they were happening almost every day now. Most of the action was down near the docks; on Fairfoot Road where

we lived, they'd been more of an annoyance, forcing you out of bed in the middle of the night and into a freezing-cold air-raid shelter.

In the foyer, the lights were off. All I could see were the outlines of the front doors and the cash desk just inside. Already the space was filling up with people – but our sister wasn't one of them.

'She can't still be in the lavs.' Cliff's hand felt sticky in mine.

'She's probably powdering her nose,' I said, with a confidence I wasn't feeling. 'You've seen how glammed up she is tonight.'

'She's the dead spit of Mum.'

'She's got her best coat on, that's why.' I tapped my foot anxiously. 'Oh come on, Sukie.'

As the last few people came out into the foyer, the mood seemed to change. People were hurrying, jostling into those already making their way out.

'Stop pushing!' a man shouted like he was in charge. 'We'll get you all out, just slow down!'

Holding Cliff's hand even tighter, I wasn't sure what to do: stay and wait for Sukie, or go with everyone else to the nearest shelter. Someone was shining a torch at the floor to help guide people's feet. Then that went out too. A woman screamed, and though no one else

joined in, you could feel the panic building.

I took a deep breath, trying to keep calm. 'Stay here, Cliff. I'm going to find—'

A hand came down heavily on my shoulder. 'You, lassie, and you, laddie.' It was the man in charge. 'What you dithering here for?'

I tried to explain: 'My sister's in the toilet.'

'I've just checked the lavs. Ain't nobody left inside but us, sweetheart.' The second voice was a woman's.

Two sets of hands steered us towards the door. Before I could shrug them off, we were out on the pavement. The noises, the smells of burning hit me at once. I felt a jolt of pure, cold fear. Up in the sky, searchlight beams criss-crossed the darkness. Already, I could hear the faint *crack-crack* of our guns as the German aircraft got closer, and fought the urge to cover my head protectively with my arms.

'I don't like it, Olive,' Cliff muttered.

I didn't, either. And until we found Sukie I was the big sister, the responsible one. That was pretty alarming too.

'Don't worry,' I told him, a stupid thing to say but it was all I could think of. 'Sukie's probably waiting for us in the shelter.'

We hurried down the street after the last few

stragglers. By now the roads were almost deserted. On the corner, an air-raid warden waved frantically, the white stripes of his uniform dimly visible in the blackout.

'Hurry up, you lot!' he shouted. 'What you waiting for, Christmas?'

Still holding Cliff's hand, I crossed the road. Thankfully there in front of us was the tube station, busy with men, women, a few little children, who were heading through the entrance with packets of sandwiches and pillows under their arms. Moving amongst the crowd was a Women's Royal Voluntary Service person in her navy blue uniform, hurrying people inside.

'Come on, you two,' she said, seeing Cliff and me on our own without a grown-up. I was glad to have an adult take charge. 'There's going to be cake and board games laid on tonight. It'll be quite a party down there!'

Cliff, liking the sound of it, reached out to take her hand; in doing so he let go of mine. He was only a few paces ahead of me, going down the steps with the nice WRVS lady. I just happened to glance behind. At a sound. At a sense. *Something.*

There was Sukie, looking around in panic. The relief made my legs go weak.

'Sukie!' I yelled, waving madly. 'Over here!'

She was running away from the shelter. And fast too – faster than I'd ever seen her run before – her arms pumping like pistons. She didn't turn, or slow down. I don't think she even heard me.

The air-raid warden was yelling now. 'Bomb incoming! Get down!'

He threw himself on to the pavement. I wasn't quick enough. The telltale whistling came next . . . An eerie silence . . .

Then a *WHUMP* as the bomb hit just a few hundred yards away. The ground rocked underneath me. Air was sucked from my chest, making me gasp and stagger backwards, though somehow I stayed on my feet. Glass smashed, bricks fell, planes droned onwards. Everything swirled dizzily together. For a moment I didn't know which way the sky was.

As the dust cleared, my stunned brain did too. Twenty yards or so up ahead was my sister. She was limping slightly, with one of her shoes missing, but still rapidly disappearing down the street.

'Sukie!' I cried again in frustration. 'Wait! We're here!'

She was searching for us, I was certain, and knowing her, she wouldn't think to keep herself safe. She'd stay out here, not giving up until she found us. This was what terrified me. Cliff would be all right in the shelter

with the WRVS lady. What mattered was getting hold of Sukie.

Side-stepping the air-raid warden as he got unsteadily to his feet, I ran after my sister. The warden shouted something, I didn't hear what.

'Sukie! Slow down!' I cried, gas-mask box bouncing at my hip.

She was too far ahead. A silly, random thought came to me of how nice her hair still looked as it swung against the green of Mum's coat. Then panic. I'd never catch up with her. I'd a stitch in my side and even hobbling with one shoe, she was still too quick for me.

This part of the road had already been badly hit. The air was thick with brick dust and smoke, making me cough horribly. The road, full of potholes, was lined either side with blackened, shadowy shop fronts. Smashed glass from blown-out windows scrunched beneath my feet, and there was water everywhere, gushing past my feet. My ears were ringing. I felt light-headed too, as if everything was unreal – like I was watching myself in a film.

Still the planes kept coming. *Whoosh*. Silence. You could count the beats between. Then *thud* as a bomb hit. I was angry at my own feeble legs for not going any faster, but eventually I had to stop. Doubling

over, I gasped for breath. Up ahead, at last, Sukie was slowing down too. Thank goodness.

It was then I saw why.

Emerging from an alleyway was a man I didn't recognise. He was tall, with slicked-back hair, wearing a mackintosh belted tight around his middle. He looked wet through, like he'd waded through a river to get here. Sukie went right up to him and shook his hand. I stopped in the middle of the street, confused.

What was she *doing*?

They were talking now. It didn't look like a normal chat about the weather either, because their heads were close together and the man kept glancing behind him. He gave Sukie a piece of paper before taking her hand and squeezing it in both of his.

Was she out here searching for us, then? It didn't look that way.

All I knew was she'd left us in a hurry, and this was where she'd gone – not to the toilet or the tube station but to meet a young man. It was probably why she'd got glammed up in the first place. I didn't know whether to laugh or burst into tears.

'Sukie!' I yelled.

She spun round. A strange look flitted over her face. As the man shrank back into the shadows,

Sukie hobbled towards me, shaking her head.

'You shouldn't have followed me!' She sounded furious. Frightened. It made me scared too. I grabbed on to her coat sleeve; now I'd found her I wasn't letting go. As more planes droned overhead, she glanced worriedly at the sky: 'Oh hell! Get down!'

A terrific *WHUMP* pitched me forwards on my knees. All round I heard cracking sounds as windows bent inwards. Another bomb hit with a *THUMP*. Something heavy was falling nearby. I cowered down, too terrified to look.

A minute passed or it might've been an hour. I was too disorientated to be sure. When I did lift my head to look around the street was full of glass and water – a burst main soaked everything like a downpour. Sukie was nowhere to be seen. The ringing in my ears was deafening. Where the shop fronts had been before was now just a heap of smoking rubble.

I tried to stand. Only suddenly, there was nothing to stand *on*. The air filled with screaming and a horrid smell like burning hair. The sky flashed brilliant white. I felt myself lift up. Up and up like I'd never stop. There was no air to breathe. Then I was falling down again, very hard and very fast.

I don't remember the landing part.