

INSPIRED BY TRUE EVENTS IN WWII

OLIVIA SPOONER

THE
SONGBIRDS
of
FLORENCE

Miles from home,
in a world
at war...

They put their
hearts and lives
on the line.



THE
SONGBIRDS
of
FLORENCE

PROPERTY OF HACHETTE AOTEAROA NZ

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*To Mum and Dad,
with love xx*

*And in memory of my grandfather Kenneth
McKenzie Wilson (2.N.Z.E.F)*

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*'How long will the war last?' she asked suddenly.
'For the rest of our lives,' he said.*

—Dan Davin, *For the Rest of Our Lives*

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PROLOGUE

FLORENCE, ITALY

JUNE 1965

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MARGOT

She entered the trattoria and sat at a small inside table, her back against the cool stone wall. It was a welcome reprieve from the midday heat.

A waiter approached. *'Buongiorno,'* he said, with the slightly flirtatious expression Margot had come to associate with so many Italian men.

'Buongiorno,' she replied, continuing in fluent Italian, 'what is the dish of the day?'

The man blinked in surprise, no doubt having assumed she was yet another English or American tourist. They were swarming all over Tuscany at present, with a number of them currently ensconced at the tables beneath the awning out the front.

'Where are you from?' the waiter asked, glancing at Margot's hand. It happened often, that quick, less-than-subtle check for a wedding band. Margot sometimes considered wearing a ring but decided against it: a small yet not insignificant act of defiance.

Margot hesitated before answering, 'New Zealand.'

The man's eyes widened, then he turned his head and shouted towards the kitchen, 'Nonna! This beautiful lady is here all the way from New Zealand.'

There was an answering cry, and seconds later a short, grey-haired woman in a yellow-and-blue apron bustled through the swinging doors. Her eyes filled with tears as she gripped Margot's shoulders and kissed first one cheek then the other. 'We are grateful, so grateful to your Kiwi boys.'

Margot struggled to maintain her composure. '*Grazie*,' she murmured.

The woman studied her face for a moment then dragged a chair closer. She eased herself onto it with a sigh, then leant forward and gripped one of Margot's hands. 'You lost someone here, no?' she asked, in stilted English. 'A husband maybe?'

Margot didn't want to talk about the war. She didn't want to remember what had happened in this tiny village on the outskirts of Florence all those years ago. But it was the reason she was here. The reason she had finally plucked up the courage to come. 'Not a husband,' she said softly in Italian. 'But someone I loved.'

The woman barked at her grandson, who immediately hurried over to the bar.

'He was seven years old when the Nazis came,' the elderly woman whispered. 'He didn't cry once while we hid in the cellar, not once in those long ten days until' – she stopped and took a deep breath – 'until your brave boys saved us. Then he cried for hours.' She wiped at the tears on her cheek then pointed at a woman sweeping past with an armload of dirty plates. Her long shiny black hair was tied back with a scarf. 'His sister, Aria. She

was ten years old and she cried every day. Those Nazis killed her father, they beat her *nonno*, they destroyed our home, but' – the woman squeezed Margot's hand – 'we survived, yes?'

Margot nodded, her throat tight. She'd visited the wine cellar that morning: the dark, underground room where, in July 1944, hundreds of citizens of San Michele a Torri had hidden while Nazis occupied the villa overhead. For ten days, with only wine to quench their thirst and a small amount of bread and sugar, they listened to the constant barrage of gunfire and bombing as the Kiwis fought to expel the Germans.

'We didn't know who would open the cellar doors,' the woman said, a wobble in her voice. 'Would it be the Nazis, who had taken our food, our homes, our loved ones, or would we finally be freed?'

Her grandson returned with a bottle of Vin Santo and three small wine glasses. He poured in silence. 'We toast,' said the woman, lifting her glass. 'We toast the bravery of your boys, who came from the other side of the world to help us.'

With a shaking hand, Margot raised her own glass. 'Thank you,' she croaked. 'Thank you for remembering them.'

They downed their drinks, and the woman heaved herself to her feet, patting Margot on the back. 'You eat my fine food, yes?' 'Yes,' Margot replied, forcing a smile.

With the restaurant busy, Margot was left in peace to devour her pasta with a simple peppery sauce, followed by a delicious plate of thinly sliced roasted veal. She took her time, making her way through two glasses of the local white wine and watching the other diners. It didn't bother her sitting at a table alone. She was used to it by now.

When she finally rose to leave, the grandson refused to let Margot pay for her meal. If she insisted, he would be in big trouble, he said, dipping his head towards the kitchen. Margot thanked him warmly and stepped back out into the brightness of the day. Glancing at her watch and deciding she had a little more time before she needed to return to Florence, she wandered past the shops and houses rebuilt after the war and down a chalky track between rows of grapevines to a pond at the bottom of a steep hill. With the sun warming her back, she stared up at the village and thought of all the men she had met during the war years. The ones who had made it home, and those who now lay in cemeteries across Italy and the Middle East. The New Zealanders who'd been a part of the 2nd Division Army twenty years ago would be remembered for many more years to come – and rightly so – but Margot had a feeling her own role in the war would be forgotten, was already fading from history. The women she had worked alongside would become a footnote, a surprising anecdote one or two people might bring up at the dinner table. Some days Margot thought they'd sacrificed every ounce of themselves during the years they'd spent in Cairo, Bari, Rome and Florence; at other times she wondered if their contribution to the war effort had been of any value at all. Not that Margot would ever regret boarding the ship from Wellington to Egypt. The experience had changed her in ways she could never have imagined. For a start, she would never have met Addy.

Checking her watch again, Margot strode back up the hill and climbed into the little Fiat she had hired for the day. She opened her window to release the stuffy air and left it open as she drove down the narrow, winding road. Addy would understand Margot's

THE SONGBIRDS OF FLORENCE

conflicting thoughts. They had been through so much together since those overwhelming early days in Egypt.

Margot's heart grew lighter as she admired the fields of bright yellow mustard flowers covering the Tuscan hills. She thought of the evening ahead and grinned. Oh, how she had missed her friend. She couldn't wait to finally see Addy again.

ADDY

Letting the water cascade over her body as she stood in the marble-walled shower, Addy reminisced about all the wonderful shops she had visited that afternoon as she'd wandered around Florence. The city had been entirely transformed since she was last here, almost twenty years ago. Back then, piles of rubble had littered the streets, the locals wore threadbare clothes and often went barefoot, shops were either closed or had very little on the shelves, and everyone wore matching expressions of loss and weariness.

Now, the city burst with beauty and wealth. Bridges and buildings had been repaired or rebuilt, shops were filled to the brim, and everyone was dressed fashionably. The Florentines were streets ahead of New Zealanders when it came to style. Colourful accessories were clearly the order of the day: belts, scarves, gloves, hats and earrings. Addy could always tell an Italian from a tourist by the care with which their outfits had been put together. Addy

hadn't been able to resist doing a spot of shopping herself and was looking forward to putting on her new dress – bright yellow, tailored, with multicoloured buttons and a matching belt. She'd even bought the hat designed to go with the outfit, though she was sure she'd never wear it again once they returned home. It was far too bold for little old New Zealand.

Turning off the shower, Addy paused as a sudden sense of déjà vu flooded through her. The New Zealand army had requisitioned this hotel shortly after liberating Florence. It was to be used as a club for soldiers on leave, and it had been where Addy and several other women had lived and worked. How many times had she turned off the shower and said a silent prayer, hoping beyond all hope that Tom would survive the war? For months she had lived with a permanent knot of fear in the pit of her stomach, and she felt it return briefly now, a reminder of how difficult their time working here had been. Because it hadn't just been Tom she'd worried about. She'd been concerned for the other women – Margot especially – not to mention every New Zealand soldier who had ever walked through the doors of the New Zealand Forces Clubs; every man she had served tea and sandwiches to; every man she had danced with; every man she had received letters from; every man she'd smiled at and who'd done his best to smile back, even when he was barely holding himself together.

Stepping out of the shower, Addy began to dry herself with a large towel. She had been so looking forward to returning to the Hotel Baglioni and being reunited with her dear friend Margot. It had taken months of planning and saving, not to mention hours of travel to get from one side of the world to the other, but Addy

hadn't once considered what effect being back in Florence would have on her. How vulnerable it would make her feel.

Addy frowned at her reflection in the mirror. She needed to shake off this despondency. She was in Italy, for goodness' sake! Looking at her new dress hanging on the back of the bathroom door, images flashed through her head of the silk dresses she'd had made for her in Cairo during the war. She wondered what had happened to them. Surely she had taken them home after the war and placed them in storage, yet she couldn't remember seeing them in years.

Addy turned her attention to dressing, then doing her hair and make-up. After a final glance in the mirror, she opened the door and entered the bedroom.

Her husband hadn't moved. He was still stretched out on the rock-hard bed in a white singlet and black shorts, watching the television with the sound turned off. Turning to look at her, he raised his eyebrows and whistled in appreciation. 'Nice dress,' he said, beckoning her towards him. 'Let me get a proper look.'

'We'll never make it in time if I come any closer, and you know it,' Addy said sternly. 'Surely the game is over by now?'

'Extra time,' he replied, getting up from the bed and stepping towards her. 'But suddenly I've lost all interest.' He slid an arm around her waist and leant in to kiss her gently on the neck.

She pushed him away, laughing. 'Not a chance, mister!'

'Come on, Addy. It's not every day we get to stay in a fancy hotel in Florence.'

Addy shook her head. 'We're due to meet Margie. She's probably waiting for us already.'

Sighing dramatically, he let her go. 'I'd better have a quick shower first myself. You go, and I'll be right behind you.'

'Okay.' Giving him a peck on the cheek, Addy snatched her hat from the dressing table and headed towards the door.

She rode the lift to the top floor, stepped into the wide foyer and made her way towards the bar. It was grander, and far more luxurious than the days when it was filled with rowdy men in uniform. New carpet, new wallpaper, a new sense of calm.

The barman smiled appreciatively as she approached, and she flushed as his gaze travelled up and down her body. Nice to know she could still draw attention even at forty-four years of age. '*Buonasera*,' he said huskily. Then, switching to English, he added, 'How may I help you?'

'Hello,' she said brightly. 'I'm meeting someone.' She pointed at the French doors opening onto the rooftop terrace.

He nodded. 'I believe your friend is around the corner with a view of—'

'The Duomo,' Addy finished. Of course Margot would be there. It was her favourite spot.

Addy stepped onto the terrace and paused for a moment, her heart thudding in her chest. It was more beautiful than ever. The trellises covered in flowering vines giving off a subtle perfume, the pretty wrought-iron tables and chairs, the pots of shrubs, the apricot evening light, the powder-blue sky, the magnificent view of the tiled roofs and church spires of Florence and the undulating green hills beyond. Addy took a deep breath in and let it out. She strode along the terrace past several groups, some speaking Italian, others with loud American accents. Rounding the corner, she spied Margot sitting at the table on the edge of the terrace,

gazing at the Duomo. As if sensing Addy's presence, she turned and immediately rose to her feet.

Addy fought to stop tears leaking from her eyes and ruining her make-up before the night had even begun.

'Addy!' exclaimed Margot, rushing towards her. 'You're here!'

'Margie,' she whispered, her legs unsteady all of a sudden. She couldn't take another step. Instead she waited, waited for Margot to reach her.

They threw their arms around each other and Addy let out a small bleat. 'It's beautiful,' she gasped. 'It's all so horribly, painfully beautiful.'

'I know,' said Margot, hugging her even tighter. 'It's awful, Addy, I know.'

PART ONE

CAIRO, EGYPT

JUNE 1942

PROPERTY OF HACHETTE AOTEAROA NZ

I

MARGOT

Shuffling down the gangway behind the other girls, Margot felt as if she were being baked in a giant, foul-smelling oven. The stifling air stank of animal dung, diesel and some sort of spice that made her stomach churn. She'd heard all about the crushing heat in Egypt, but she hadn't been prepared, couldn't have imagined it was possible for the air to be so *oppressive*.

Margot wanted to race back up the gangway and hide in her cabin until the ship turned around and headed back to New Zealand. Though the ship wasn't returning home, Margot reminded herself; not immediately, anyway. It was only stopping in Port Tewfik overnight to deliver supplies, along with Margot and nine other young women, to the New Zealand Army before carrying on to England.

'I'm cooking in this blasted uniform,' muttered the girl behind Margot.

Margot didn't reply, instead wiping at the bead of sweat sliding off her forehead. Leaving Wellington Harbour six weeks earlier in a stiff southerly wind, the new uniform had felt wonderfully smart and warm – a made-to-measure khaki tunic in soft wool, matching greatcoat with leather buttons, white shirt, khaki tie, khaki stockings and felt hat with a New Zealand Army badge sewn on the front – but in these stifling conditions, Margot resented every single item.

Stepping off the gangway, Margot lined up with the other women to face their welcoming committee. An impeccably dressed older lady in a tailored two-piece and an elaborate pale yellow hat with a bow and netting stood before them, flanked by three New Zealand Army officers. The woman looked familiar, and Margot tried to work out where she had seen her before.

'Welcome, ladies – or should I say, my Tuis,' said the woman in a British accent. 'I'm Lady Freyberg.'

Margot's eyes widened and she stood a little straighter. They'd heard General Freyberg's wife had taken special charge of the Tuis, named after the distinctive New Zealand songbird, but it was still a surprise to have her waiting on the docks to greet them. No wonder she'd looked familiar – since the war had begun, there had been several photographs of the Freybergs in the newspapers.

'I want to thank you for your service, and for coming all this way to help us in our fight against the Axis armies,' said Lady Freyberg. 'I won't keep you standing in the sun, as you must be extremely hot in those uniforms. Fortunately, we have drivers to take us into Cairo.' She gestured towards a row of black military cars behind her.

Lady Freyberg stepped towards Margot, tapped her on the arm and nodded to the two girls on her left. 'You three ladies may come with me; the rest of you can travel in the other cars. Point out your luggage and we'll make a start.'

Margot met Lady Freyberg's warm gaze and attempted to smile, only her face wouldn't move. She hoped Lady Freyberg would not take it as a personal insult, the way most of the Tuis Margot had travelled with must have done.

They'd tried for the first few days, inviting Margot to join in with on-board activities and attempting to draw her into conversation over meals. But Margot hadn't been able to respond with the animation and enthusiasm she knew was expected. Twice she'd come close to telling them why, explaining that it was nothing to do with them and entirely due to some fault within her, yet she had remained silent and withdrawn. It had been a year since Margot was able to smile properly and she didn't know how to fix it. It was as if a connection in her brain had been damaged and she couldn't get her facial muscles to work. She couldn't be properly human anymore.

Enlisting in the Women's Auxiliary Army Corps had been her desperate attempt to escape the feeling she had of barely existing, while life happened around her. She'd hoped that doing something wildly outside her comfort zone would somehow flick a switch and bring her back into the world, but even now, standing in this foreign land miles from home, she remained in a void.

Margot trailed after Lady Freyberg and the two other Tuis towards their car, avoiding the crowds of uniformed men on the docks who were shouting and grunting as they unloaded crates of supplies. From the rear of a medical truck, nurses assisted men

with bandages around their heads and crutches under their arms towards a waiting ship. Margot quickly looked away to see a tank swinging precariously in the air, held by flimsy chains as it was offloaded from another ship. Everywhere was noisy and hot, the sights unlike anything Margot had seen before.

Wedge in the back seat between two girls whose names she should have known after weeks together at sea, Margot realised her heart was beating faster than usual and she was taking short, shallow breaths. Was it a reaction to the heat or was she finally beginning to waken from her stupor?

They left the crowded docks behind and picked up speed. It was a fraction cooler with the car moving at a reasonable clip and the windows open, but Margot still felt as if every pore of her body was leaking. The backs of her stockings were uncomfortably damp against the seat.

Lady Freyberg swivelled from her position in the front passenger seat to face her. 'What is your name, dear?' she asked.

'Margot,' she croaked.

'And where are you from?'

'Masterton.'

'Oh, wonderful – that's near Wellington, I believe?'

'Yes, Lady Freyberg.'

'My husband grew up in Wellington. He has many fond memories.'

Margot nodded, unable to think of anything to say. Why, oh why, couldn't she at least *act* normally?

Thankfully, Lady Freyberg had turned her attention to the other two Tuis. The pretty, bubbly blonde on Margot's left introduced herself as Lily from New Plymouth, and then Edith

from Christchurch, sitting on Margot's other side, said hello. They both chatted excitedly with Lady Freyberg as Margot shrank back into her seat.

Gazing through the front windscreen she felt a strange tingling in her face and down her neck. She was here. She had made it to the desert Ed had described so often in his letters. Apart from sand and rocky outcrops, there was nothing else: no green grass, no trees, no sign of civilisation other than the bumpy road they were driving along, a steady stream of army trucks rumbling past, and the occasional ramshackle building on the side of the road, with dark-skinned men in white robes standing out front next to skeletal cows or donkeys.

'Now, my dears,' said Lady Freyberg, 'we are heading to the New Zealand Forces Club, where you will be living and working. Your duties will be varied but the most important one is this: I am depending on you to take care of our boys. Make them forget the challenges of war. Give them a taste of home. Trust me when I say they need you. You'll be providing a vital service that cannot be underestimated.'

Margot nodded along with the other two girls, though she was confused as to what services they would be expected to provide.

'I ask you to always look your very best for our boys,' Lady Freyberg continued. 'Please wear make-up, including lipstick, and ensure your hair is tidy. Protect your skin by moisturising regularly and staying out of the sun. Nail polish is highly encouraged, as are regular visits to the hairdressers. Some Tuis have started wearing colourful handkerchiefs in their pockets, which is a wonderful addition.'

Margot licked her lips. At least she'd remembered to apply lipstick before leaving the ship, but she imagined her mousy curls pinned hastily to the nape of her neck were a frightful mess.

'Look!' squealed Lily. 'The pyramids.'

Craning her head awkwardly, Margot followed Lily's pointed finger. Far in the distance, the distinct outline of the pyramids cut into the horizon, mysterious and otherworldly. Ed's letter telling her how he'd climbed to the top of the tallest pyramid had been full of awe and enthusiasm, and Margot remembered how jealous she had felt, thinking at the time she would never have an opportunity to see them for herself. Yet here she was. 'Gosh,' Margot breathed. 'Aren't they magnificent?'

Lily turned abruptly to face her. 'Well look at that,' she said. 'I knew you were in there somewhere.'

Margot realised she was smiling and had an overwhelming urge to cry. Tears were something else Margot had been unable to produce in a long time.

Lily reached out and squeezed Margot's leg briefly before turning to look out of her window. The car fell silent as they continued on the straight, endless road. It was like a line dissecting the desert in two. *A line drawn in the sand*, thought Margot.

An hour later, in the shimmering heat, the city of Cairo came into full view. Buildings rose into the sky, which was dotted with the striking outlines of minarets and mosques. On a hill overlooking the city sat the Citadel surrounded by a tall wall, just as imposing as Ed's description had made it sound. As they entered Cairo, Margot's head turned rapidly from side to side as she tried to take in as many of the sights as she could. The architecture was fascinating compared to the bland buildings

back home. The history of this ancient city was all around her, invading her senses.

Cars and taxis and funny-looking carts being pulled by horses appeared seemingly in a flash, bringing a cacophony of sound and commotion. As their car slowed in traffic, small boys ran alongside, waving and shouting. Taxis blared their horns, and cars, military trucks and men in uniform were everywhere. Unusual smells wafted through the windows, and Margot felt a rush of something powerful surge through her body. Her pulse throbbed at her wrists.

Their car turned onto a wide boulevard, ornate buildings with wrought-iron railings and shutters lining either side.

‘Here’s the club,’ said Lady Freyberg proudly.

They stopped in front of an attractive building with a banner hanging across the main entrance that read NEW ZEALAND FORCES CLUB. A huddle of soldiers in the familiar New Zealand uniform stood chatting on the steps outside and turned to watch as an Egyptian man dashed out of the entrance to open Lady Freyberg’s door. When she stepped onto the footpath, the soldiers stood up straighter, adjusting their hats and tucking in their shirts. Then they stared candidly at first Lily then Margot and Edith alighted from the car.

‘Hello, ladies,’ one of the soldiers called. ‘You’re a welcome sight.’

‘These lovely girls have just arrived from New Zealand,’ Lady Freyberg announced.

Margot could only manage a half-hearted wave before following Lady Freyberg into the wide, airy foyer with high ceilings, colourful mosaic tiles on the floor and a polished wooden staircase. The loud din of men’s voices came from a set

of double doors to their left. 'That's the bar,' said Lady Freyberg. 'You won't be required to work in there, of course. Oh, here are the other girls now.'

The remaining seven Tuis who had arrived on the ship with Margot filed into the foyer, their faces red from the heat and their eyes wide with excitement.

'I'll give you a quick tour of the ground floor while we wait for the head Tui, Sergeant Walker, to join us.' Lady Freyberg strode towards an opening in the wall where a young woman stood behind a raised counter. 'This is the cash desk,' said Lady Freyberg. 'And this is Claire, a fellow Tui.'

'Boy are we glad to see you lot,' said Claire warmly.

'No cash is handled upstairs,' said Lady Freyberg. 'Instead, the boys purchase tickets from the desk. You'll learn all about it in due course. And through that door,' she said, pointing, 'is the barber shop, and further on is the prep room, which you will soon become acquainted with.'

'You sure will,' muttered Claire.

An older, robust woman wearing the same uniform as Claire came bustling down the stairs, her face strained. 'Apologies – there was an incident with the tea urns.'

'Not at all,' said Lady Freyberg. 'Girls, this is Sergeant Walker, the Tui in charge.'

Sergeant Walker fixed them with a stern look. 'I hope you are all well after your voyage.'

'Yes, ma'am,' Lily replied.

The head Tui glared at her. 'Sergeant Walker, please.'

'S-sorry,' stammered Lily.

‘Right,’ said the sergeant, turning to Lady Freyberg. ‘Shall we head upstairs?’

The next ten minutes were thoroughly overwhelming as they were hastily shown the various rooms on the first floor. There was the officers’ dining room, the ladies’ lounge, an office for the army major in charge of the club (who greeted them with a barely perceptible nod while speaking loudly on the phone), the library, the writing room and the medical officer’s room. When they reached the common room, several of the girls cooed with delight at the rose curtains, glass-topped tables and floral-covered chairs where soldiers sat and were waited on by dark-skinned men in white outfits.

Margot kept looking about in confusion. This wasn’t at all what she had been expecting. Before she could pluck up the courage to ask a question, they were being ushered into the giant main lounge, where there were at least fifty servicemen. Some were sitting but most were standing in groups near the open windows. The large room was loud and hot and smelt of sweat and hair pomade and something sweet. At the far side, several Tuis were bustling about behind some counters. They were flushed, smiling and nodding at the men queuing before them.

‘There’s a tea counter, a cake counter, an orange juice station and the soda counter – which also serves ice cream, so as you can imagine it is very popular at the moment. Oh, and over there is the stage, where you may be asked to perform.’ As she spoke, the sergeant herded them back out of the room. ‘And those are the main areas where you’ll be working, though there are a number of other jobs you’ll be required to do.’

Margot looked at the rest of the Tuis gathered around her and was relieved to see she wasn't the only one looking bewildered.

'Right!' The sergeant clapped her hands. 'Let's find your luggage and I'll have you shown to your rooms.'

As the Tuis followed meekly behind Sergeant Walker, Margot hung back. Her eye had been caught by a man standing on his own in the corner. He was holding a cup of tea and trying to take a sip, but his hands were shaking so hard the tea kept spilling over the sides onto the saucer and he couldn't seem to wrap his lips around the edge of the cup. There was a large mottled bruise on his neck.

Margot swallowed, took a deep breath, and followed after the others.