

HAZEL GAYNOR

INSPIRED BY TRUE EVENTS



The
Last
Lifeboat

Two seagulls in flight, one on the left and one on the right, framing the title.

One fateful night. Eight unimaginable days.

**Two women bound together in the
most devastating way.**

THE LAST LIFEBOAT
Hazel Gaynor

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Dedication

*For Tanya,
in memory of your dear mum,
Joan Flanagan*

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3 September 1939

War! Listened to Chamberlain's announcement over the wireless this morning. All very serious until the dog stood up during the national anthem, which made me laugh and then set everyone else off, too. Probably inappropriate to find humour at a time of national crisis, but it might be the last laugh we have for a while. Besides, it was a useful way to hide my tears. The children leave for the countryside today. I don't know what else to say about that.

Mass-Observation, Diarist #6672

Mid-Atlantic. 17 September 1940

Alice can't breathe. The wind snatches her breath away, leaving her gasping for air as she half-jumps, half-stumbles into the lifeboat and falls, face down, against the boards. She tries to pull herself up, but the lifeboat pitches violently as another monstrous wave smashes into them and throws Alice into a woman beside her. The woman loses her grip on the rain-slicked mast and tumbles, with extraordinary grace, into the dark ocean, her white nightdress unfurling around her as she spins and twirls like a ballerina in a pirouette. Too shocked to respond, Alice can't look away.

'Miss! *Miss!* Can you help the children?'

A tall man in plaid pyjamas emerges through the rain. He grabs the mast to steady himself as he points toward something at the other end of the lifeboat, but the storm steals his words and fear smothers Alice's ability to respond. She clings desperately to the bottom of the mast and tries not to think about the falling woman as she searches for something familiar to orient herself amid the chaos, but there is nothing. No stars, no moon, not even the bright hue of the flares they'd sent up to alert the other ships in the convoy to their distress. Every source of light Alice has known during her five days at sea has been extinguished, leaving a darkness so intense that there is no obvious point at which the ocean ends and the sky begins. Everything is upside down. Upended. Destroyed.

'Miss! The children!'

Through the roar of the wind, Alice hears a high-pitched mewling, but her attention is caught by an elderly man leaning dangerously out over the side of the lifeboat as he reaches for a hand in the water. Alice watches through the blinding spray from the waves as another man joins him, then a third, and then the man in the pyjamas stumbles forward to help, each of them reaching and grasping until one of them grabs the hand, but the heaving swell sends the lifeboat rearing up, and the pale fingers slip from his grasp. Again and again, they try. Twice, Alice thinks they have her – a woman in a white nightdress – but the ocean is in no mood for mercy. Another huge wave lashes the lifeboat and the woman is swept away. The men sink to their knees, their battle lost. The elderly man sobs like a child.

Amid the fury of the storm, and the chaos and noise of the two dozen or so terrified souls crowded into the narrow lifeboat around her, Alice tries desperately to remember her training. But the simple remedies for

seasickness, the songs and games to keep the children entertained, the procedures to follow ‘in the unlikely event’ of an instruction to abandon ship are of no use to her now. There was no protocol to follow for when you found yourself in an open lifeboat in a furious storm, your ship torpedoed by a German U-boat and sinking fast, lifeboats all around you capsized, damaged and waterlogged, leaving desperate souls floundering in the raging water.

Alice crawls forward, infant-like, on hands and knees. Concealed iron rivets and hard wooden ridges dig painfully into her skin. The wind screams. Needle-sharp hailstones hammer against her forehead. She shuffles blindly on, bumping into huddled forms and clambering over bare feet and legs. All around her, male voices call out instructions she doesn’t understand. ‘Pull the Fleming gear.’ ‘Under the thwarts.’ ‘Lash him to the gunwale.’ There is so much noise, she can’t think straight. She lunges forward as the boat pitches sharply down and another wall of frigid seawater drenches her from head to toe, sluicing down the back of her thin cotton jacket and blouse, seeping into her torn stockings and forming lakes in her best leather shoes.

At last, her hands connect with a low bench-like seat. She hauls herself onto it, wraps her arms around her body and closes her eyes to the nightmare surrounding her, just as she had as a frightened child crouched at the back of her grandmother’s wardrobe, willing the awful noises downstairs to stop.

‘Miss! I need you to help them!’ The man in the pyjamas has returned. His eyes are wild, his voice urgent. ‘You’re with the seavacs – the evacuees. One of them escorts.’

It is a statement, not a question.

Alice nods as her eyes settle on a tangle of reedy arms and bare feet huddled against the thwarts behind her. Barely able to distinguish one child from another, she counts five boys and one girl. They are each bunched up into a tight ball, hands wrapped around their knees, heads bent against the wind and rain. She doesn’t recognize any of them.

‘They’re not from my group.’ She shouts to make herself heard above the storm. ‘I was assigned to lifeboat seven.’ There must be another escort in this lifeboat. Someone responsible for these children. ‘Are there any other children?’

The man grabs her shoulder. 'No. And I don't care which bloody lifeboat you were assigned to. They need you to help them, for Christ's sake!'

His words swirl and snap at her as the lifeboat plunges violently down again.

Alice's teeth chatter uncontrollably. Her entire body convulses with shock and fear and cold as the lifeboat rears and bucks wildly. She clings to the seat, too terrified to move. 'Please, just leave me alone! Help will be on the way.'

The man stumbles forward so that his face is right in front of Alice's, his eyes fixed on hers. There is an intensity to his stare, but there is also compassion. 'What's your name?'

'Alice. Alice King.' She can hardly speak she trembles so much.

'Listen, Alice. I know you're frightened. We're all bloody terrified.' He looks up as someone shouts for help from the other end of the lifeboat. 'They're crying for their mothers, and you're the only woman in the lifeboat now.' He stumbles away from her, responding to the panicked shouts and screams now coming from every direction.

She shuffles toward the bedraggled creatures. The five boys are dressed in their pyjamas. The girl wears a thin lace-trimmed nightie. Only one of them wears an overcoat. Only one is wearing shoes. 'It's all right, children,' she says as the lifeboat plunges down. 'Help is coming. Is anybody hurt?'

They all shake their heads. That is something, at least.

Alice peels off her jacket and drapes it around the girl's narrow shoulders. 'Does anyone have a coat, or jacket?' she shouts out into the dark. 'There are six children here. If you have anything, pass it down.' If they don't drown, they'll surely all die of hypothermia before the night is out.

The boy wearing the coat tugs on Alice's sleeve and grabs her hand. 'Where are the others?' He is barely able to get the words out, his teeth chatter so much. 'Where's everyone else?'

The wind screams and the lifeboat pitches wildly as Alice looks helplessly at the seething ocean and the dark that surrounds them before she turns to the boy. He is relying on her to have all the answers now.

'I don't know,' she says, her voice heavy with fear. 'I don't know where they are.'