

Praise for **Rip to the RESCUE**

“Jack’s fictional role as Blitz messenger boy and Rip’s owner creates the framework for a nail-biting adventure, but this is also a tale of friendship and family, in which no one is completely whole. . . . will surely appeal to young readers.” —*The New York Times Book Review*

“Amid the dark, danger, falling bombs, and debris, Halahmy’s characters (human and animal) display courage and true acts of friendship.” —*Booklist*

“A taut and affecting historical novel of friendship and courage.” —*Publishers Weekly*

It’s 1940 and no one can navigate the smoky, ash-covered streets of London like 13-year-old bike messenger Jack. When Jack finds a dog, miraculously still alive after the latest Nazi bombing, he realizes there’s something extra special about the shaggy pup. He can smell people who are trapped under debris.

With his new canine companion, nicknamed Rip because of the dog’s torn ear, maybe Jack can do more than just relay messages back and forth—he can actually save lives. And if Jack’s friend Paula is right about the impending Nazi invasion, he and Rip will need to do all they can to help Jewish families like hers.

Based on true episodes during the London Blitz in World War II, this action-packed and touching story explores the beginnings of search-and-rescue dogs and the bravery of young people determined to do their part for their country.

Cover art by Ziyue Chen

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Rip
to the
RESCUE

Miriam Halahmy

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1.

Messenger Boy

(SEPTEMBER 1940)

“It’s down to you now, Jack,” said Warden Yates, scribbling on a report form. “The line’s gone dead to the fire station. Get to Skinner Street soon as you can.”

Jack and the warden both ducked as a cluster of incendiary bombs exploded across nearby rooftops. Jack could hear shrapnel jingling down the slates like a tune he could almost whistle.

“Close,” he muttered, stuffing the message into the pocket of his blue overalls. Then he tightened the strap under his helmet and mounted his bike.

“Keep your head down!” cried the warden as Jack rode off, swerving to avoid the bomb crater at the top of the road.

There was a shop on fire up ahead, lighting up the road in the blackout. Jack raced past as fast as he could, hoping sparks

wouldn't set fire to his clothes. That's what happened to Tommy Shepherd last week, and he was still in hospital with serious burns. Tommy was fifteen, almost two years older than Jack. They'd both lied about their ages to get into the messengers. You were supposed to be seventeen.

"What an adventure," Tommy had murmured to him as they stood in line at the Town Hall two months earlier.

Jack was a full head taller than Tommy and the wardens accepted them both into training without a murmur back in July. Now it was the end of September and London had been bombed every night since the seventh.

Even if they found out I was only thirteen, they wouldn't chuck me out, Jack told himself, freewheeling past a pile of rubble. Especially since Tommy got hit.

The thought spurred him on, dreams of making heroic rescues in burning buildings chasing him down the street.



The Blitz was bad that night. The German bombers were dropping showers of incendiaries all over London, and St. Pancras Station was a target once again. Incendiaries were small, but they were dropped in baskets containing hundreds. The fires they caused lit up the streets like a beacon for the bombers to then drop high explosives. In between, the streets were pitch dark in the blackout made worse by the constant swirl of thick smoke. Jack rode with a wet handkerchief

tied around his mouth like a mask to stop breathing in the choking air.

It was bad around Camden, Holborn, and the West End, but Jack knew the East End was getting the worst. A great blanket of smoke sat permanently on the horizon toward the river, and every night the bombers tore into the docks and the homes in the narrow streets. Hundreds were killed, thousands wounded, and the hospitals were so blocked up that the Warden told the boys to use the first-aid post instead.

“If you just need a few stitches, don’t go the hospitals, boys. There’s them what needs it more.”

Jack had been up the top of Parliament Hill fields with Mum to see the damage.

“Those poor people,” was all Mum said in a quiet voice.

The wardens said a lot more, and in not such nice language.

“You wouldn’t believe it when they drop them high-explosive bombs,” Warden Yates had told them. “I was visiting my sister in Bermondsey just as they started on the East End. The air was so wild it pushed and pulled me every which way. I thought my eyeballs would be sucked out my head. Couldn’t even get my breath that night, there was smoke like acid all around us. The neighbor’s shirt was ripped off by the blast.”

“What about our boys on the river?” put in another man. “They had the fireboats pumping water onto the docks, and the fires were so hot the paint blistered on the side of the boats.”

“My cousin’s crew said the fire leapt the river, burning on both sides. Cranes was crashing over and the whole dock’s on fire,” another man said. He shook his head and stared at his boots.

Jack wanted to ask what happened to the man’s cousin, but he didn’t dare.

Warden Yates knocked his pipe out against a wall and said, “All those homes on fire, people staggering around the streets with kiddies—how much more can they take?”

No one answered as they turned back to work.



Now as Jack rode toward the fire station he concentrated on just getting through in one piece to deliver his message. *Do your job*, he told himself, as he swerved to avoid a shaft of fire swooping down.

He’d never been so needed in all his life.

At the top of Skinner Street the dark was worse than ever. He couldn’t see the road at all and slowed down to avoid getting a puncture from broken glass. Hot pieces of shrapnel were falling all around him from the shells fired by anti-aircraft guns. There was a massive thump on his helmet, and a red-hot piece of metal slid down onto the ground. His heart leapt in his chest and he wobbled on his bike, nearly tipping over.

No one was out except a couple of air raid wardens making sure that people had gone down into the bomb shelters.

Suddenly a figure loomed out of the smog, hand up in front of him, crying, "Halt!" He said something else, but the anti-aircraft guns hammering away blocked out the words.

Jack could just make out the tin helmet with WARDEN printed across the front. He pulled down the handkerchief over his mouth and gasped, "Messenger."

"Good lad," the warden shouted and waved him on with the shrouded light of his torch.

Hope he doesn't know Mum and Dad, thought Jack as he set off again. Shrapnel rained back down onto the streets all around him as he pedaled on, his bike skimming through the Blitz.

It wasn't the bombing that scared Jack Castle. He was one of the best riders in the team. The terrifying noise all around didn't bother him either—the only advantage of being deaf in his left ear. It had taken a war for anything good to come of that.

But if Mum and Dad found out, then he'd be in deep trouble. Whatever happened, he had to keep his place in the Messengers secret, especially from Dad.

Just a few more yards, legs pumping like mad, and then he pulled up his brakes and skidded to a halt. Bert Jones and the other men glanced over their shoulders.

"Where is it lad?" barked Bert, his blackened hand stretching out.

“Here. Warden Yates says . . .”

“All right, all right, give it over.” Bert snatched the paper, read it quickly, and snapped, “Harrington Square. Let’s go, boys!”

Jack pulled his bike over to the wall as he watched the men leap onto the fire engine and take off, bell ringing, winding their way ’round the cratered road at top speed.

Then he rode back to the wardens’ post, avoiding Skinner Street and the fires.

They can’t do without me, he thought, smiling to himself as a shower of ash settled like gray snow over the road.



That’s what Warden Yates had told him when he’d volunteered back in July. German bombers were already blowing up RAF planes and ripping through airstrips in southern England.

“You boys will be our life blood, we can’t cope without you if truth be told,” the air raid warden told Jack and the other messenger boys. “When the real bombing starts and mind you it will—you ain’t seen nothing yet—the phone lines will be cut, and we won’t be able to communicate with our engines. It’s you boys who’ll have to bike to the fire stations with messages so we can send the men where they’re needed.”

It was a hot day and Jack was sweating in the uniform they’d been issued—rubber boots, blue overalls, and a steel helmet—but he didn’t care. He was one of the boys at last, not

like in school when they called him Deaf Nellie and left him out of everything. In the messengers no one noticed his deaf ear.

Granddad let him keep his kit in the hall cupboard of his flat in an old apple sack. Granddad's memory wasn't that good these days, so it was unlikely he'd tell Mum and Dad. It was a risk Jack had to take, but then the whole war was a risk, wasn't it?

"I can't pretend you'll be safe riding round in the bombing," the warden had said. His eyes narrowed as he looked around at the shining faces. "Speak up now if you want to back out."

No one moved. Jack kept his head lowered.

"You boys," the warden went on, lifting his voice, "you might be too young for soldiering, but you're ready to do your bit for the war effort, eh?"

"Yes sir!" the boys cried out in unison.

Jack pulled himself up to his full height. With his broad shoulders and long legs, the warden would never guess he wasn't yet fourteen. He was taller than two of the other boys, and with a decent bike they weren't going to turn him away.



By the time Jack returned to the wardens' post, the All Clear was sounding and dawn had broken over the top of St. Pancras Station. The wardens sent them all off, and he pushed his bike home. People had emerged from the shelters by now carrying blankets and thermos flasks. As they stumbled

through the rubble and broken glass covering the roads, guiding small children around craters, there was a silent weariness broken only by the occasional cough from the smoke still filling the air.

“I can’t stand another night like that,” a woman’s voice suddenly broke out.

No one said anything, everyone trudged on, faces creased with exhaustion.

Then the shaky voice of an old man called back, “We ain’t beaten yet.”

Jack watched as they walked by, before riding off. The early morning air was cool after the heat of the blazing night. He’d run a dozen messages, braved another fearsome air raid, and earned a clap on the back from Warden Yates.

I’m *not beaten*, he told himself, as he propped his bike outside Granddad’s flat.



Granddad was already home after the raid, dozing in his armchair. Jack dumped his uniform and went off, arriving back on his street just as Mum and Dad walked into their block of flats.

“Oy, where were you last night?” called out Dad, with a scowl on his face. “I told you I want you down in the shelter when there’s a raid. What you doing, sloping off again?”

Jack's shoulders drooped and he shuffled over, pushing his bike.

"Now George, don't get so worked up," said Mum in a soothing voice.

Mum's face was whiter than ever now that it was streaked with dust that had fallen during the raid. Her light brown hair, the same color as Jack's, was coming loose from the bun on her head.

"Give me one good reason why not," snapped Dad, as he brushed some dust off his head.

Dad had fair hair, cropped short all around his head but already thinning on top. Deep lines crisscrossed his pale skin, and he looked older than his forty-two years. Jack's dad had lost a leg in the trenches in the last war and walked with a stick, limping on a badly fitting false leg. Mum said that sometimes Dad's stump hurt quite a bit and blistered, but Dad never mentioned his injury.

He'd also had a "whiff of gas" as the men used to say, and it affected his lungs. He spoke in a gruff, hoarse voice and had terrible coughing fits sometimes. Mum had to wave a newspaper frantically up and down to force air into his lungs.



But he's always been short tempered, Jack thought now, as he stared at his father's angry face. Yelling at me and Mum for no

reason. He's even worse since the war started, as if he's the only one angry with Hitler and his bully boys.

Granddad used to laugh about Dad's short temper growing up. "Got into such a state, that one, over the smallest thing. Always impatient and if he didn't get his own way, he'd stomp out. Not like his brother, your uncle Ken. He were mild as anything. But your dad"—Granddad would shake his head at the memory—"best to leave him alone when he were in a bad mood."



Jack gave an audible sigh and said, "I biked round to Granddad's. Made sure he was safe. Someone's gotta check on him in the raids."

"See," said Mum, as they started up the stairs. "There's a good lad."

Dad snorted, but to Jack's relief he didn't ask anything else.

Once they'd climbed the three flights to their flat, Dad leaning heavily on the banister and his stick, Mum opened the door and Jack followed her in. Automatically he looked for his cats, Salt and Pepper, and then he remembered. They were gone forever. Even after all these months he still wasn't used to it. That stupid evacuation to Norfolk.



The whole school had been evacuated just after the war was declared, September 3, 1939, but Jack had no one to pair up

with, not like the other lads. He absolutely hated his new home. He was the last boy chosen as they all waited in a village hall in the middle of Norfolk. An old couple took him in. They lived in a tiny hamlet with only three cottages and miles and miles of wet fields and woods. The couple were both deafer than him, and he gave up talking to them by the second night. After three weeks he wrote to Mum and threatened to run away, so she came down to bring him home. She came the next day, and they left on the evening train.

As they arrived back at their flat in Camden, tired and hungry after the long journey, she put a hand on his arm and said, “Sorry, love.”

Then she opened the front door. Jack stepped onto the mat and looked down as always, expecting Salt and Pepper to be winding their silky bodies around and around his legs, leaving black and white hairs on his socks, purring in a satisfied way that he was finally home.

But there was no sign of his pets.

“Mum?”

“Speak to your dad,” said Mum, her head ducking as she scurried down the hall to the kitchen.

A spear of alarm stabbed his stomach as Jack ran into the living room where Dad was sitting, false leg lying on the carpet, stump up on a footstool covered with the empty trouser leg.

“Where’s Salt and Pepper?” demanded Jack.

Dad removed a pipe from his mouth, knocked out the ash into an ashtray, and said, “Now look here. We did what was right, and I don’t want to hear no arguments from you, my lad.”

“Did what?”

“Like everyone said, the pets will go mad when the bombs start, and we’d never have enough rations to feed one cat, let alone two, so . . .”

“Where are they then? Who’s got them? They’re *my* cats. I’m gonna get them back, right now!”

“They’re gone,” said Dad.

“What do you mean gone?”

“To sleep—the vet put them down. They didn’t suffer, so don’t go on about it.”



“Put the kettle on, love,” called Mum now from the hallway.

“Put it on yourself,” growled Jack, his heart heavy, and stomping into his room, he slammed the door shut and threw himself on his bed.

He missed his pets so much. He’d had them since they were tiny kittens, Salt with her pure white fur and Pepper with his black fur sprinkled with gray. They’d stood by him through thick and thin, and no matter how poor his hearing he could always sense when they were talking to him and what they wanted.

Jack looked up at the old familiar cracks in the ceiling. He

picked out the one that looked like Salt curled up on a cushion, her distinctive uneven ears sticking up.

“It’s all Dad’s fault,” he whispered to himself. “He’s the real enemy.”

But there was a taste of gray ash in his mouth as if he’d swallowed a bit of the Blitz fires.