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Opening extract from

# The Wickford Doom

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Published by

**Barrington Stoke Ltd**

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First published in 2015 in Great Britain by
Barrington Stoke Ltd
18 Walker Street, Edinburgh, EH3 7LP

www.barringtonstoke.co.uk

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A CIP catalogue record for this book is available
from the British Library upon request

ISBN: 978-1-78112-409-3

Printed in China by Leo

For Anne & Tim




The air-raid siren sounded just as Harry and his mother sat down to dinner. They would just have to eat the food cold when they got back from the shelter. It wouldn't be the first time – or the last.

They had an Anderson shelter in the back garden. Harry had helped his father to build it. It was only a few yards from the back door but they walked as fast as they could, heads down, hand in hand. Harry's mother seemed to hold her breath until they arrived.

They sat silent, as always. Harry's mother held his hand so hard it hurt – but Harry never complained. They listened to the muffled thud of bombs and guns and comforted themselves with the thought that they sounded far off tonight.

Then the all-clear sounded and they could go back inside. Harry saw their neighbours doing the same, but no one spoke. The family had moved here just before Harry's father got his call-up to the army and they had never got to know anyone very well.

At first, when Harry's father was away, it felt as if Harry's mum was waiting for him to come home all the time. Waiting for him to come back so they could live proper lives again.

When they learned that he would never come home, Harry knew she felt it was wrong to live at all. She felt like it was wrong to live like normal people – like they were pretending





that their lives had not been ruined for ever by the letter that came to say his father had been killed in action.

That night, Harry woke in the small hours. It was so dark that there seemed little difference between his eyes being open or shut, but at last he began to make things out in the gloom. He heard something, too.

It was the sound of sobbing. Harry crept out of bed and along the hall. A lamp was on in the sitting room.

Harry stood at the door and saw his mother sitting in the armchair. Her head was bent, and she had a hanky in one hand and a photograph in a frame in the other.

Harry could only see the back of the photograph but he knew what it was. It was a

photo of his father in uniform in the desert, a smile on his face.

Harry's mother looked up and saw him standing there.

"Oh, Harry," she said. "I'm sorry ..."

Harry walked into the room and they hugged and his mother cried some more. Harry cried too, for all that he tried not to, because his father had told him to be brave and look after his mother when he wasn't there.

But it was hard.






The next day was Saturday and after breakfast Alan and Eric knocked at the door to see if Harry wanted to play football.

Harry was not close friends with Alan or Eric, but sometimes he needed to get out. Time seemed to have come to a stop inside the house and it felt so good to play and not think, to run free like an animal.

The boys kicked the ball around in the street until a group of younger children turned up and there were enough of them to

play something like a proper game. Harry's team lost 5–3 after the usual fierce flash of arguments about handballs and fouls and goals or no goals.

Then the young ones ran off to play hide and seek in a bomb site while Harry, Alan and Eric sat on the kerb to get their breath back.

They chatted about the air raid the night before and Alan said that it had been pretty bad. His father was an ARP warden, and he'd told Alan that the wall of a burning warehouse had collapsed on two firemen, and killed them both.

Harry's heart was always heavy after football. While the game lasted, it was like an oasis in the dull, bomb-cratered desert they lived in now. A place where he could forget the world, forget the war. But bit by bit, it always seeped back in.





When he walked in the door at home, Harry found his mother sitting at the table with a stern-looking man in a dark suit.

"Harry," his mother said. "This is Mr Williams."

Mr Williams got to his feet and held out his hand for Harry to shake. "Pleased to meet you, Harry," he said.

"Hello, sir."

"Mr Williams is a lawyer," Harry's mother said. "He has some exciting news."

Harry had no real idea what a lawyer did apart from stand up in court with a wig on. But he had the distinct feeling that whatever this man did, it wasn't fun. He didn't look like someone who was about to tell them anything exciting.

"Harry," Mr Williams said. "I am the lawyer for your father's family in Suffolk."

"But Dad hated his family," Harry said.

"Harry!" his mother cried.

Mr Williams's thin face cracked into a half-smile.

"That may be," he said, "but despite that, your father's cousin remembered your father in his will."

Harry's eyes grew wide. "They were rich, weren't they?" he said.

"They were," Mr Williams said. "Very rich at one time and still rather well-off."

"Are we going to be rich?" Harry asked. "Are we rich, Mum?"

"Shhh," his mother said. "Let Mr Williams speak."





"Your father's cousin left your father a piece of property in Suffolk," the lawyer went on. "A house and some land at a place called Wickford. Part of what had been a rather large estate."

"Goodness!" Harry's mother said. "Wickford Hall?"

She and Harry looked up at a small dark painting above the fire. It showed a gloomy manor house – a house Harry's father had always said they should live in, if only they hadn't been cheated out of it by some relative or other.

"Imagine, Harry!" Harry's mother said, and she pointed to the painting.

Harry saw the lawyer open his mouth as if he was going to say something, but then he changed his mind and smiled a forced smile instead.

"I'm afraid I am not free at the moment to give any more details about the will," Mr Williams said. "My orders were to ask you to travel to Suffolk where … well, I will explain then."

Harry's mother turned to him, beaming. "Suffolk, Harry?" she said. "How do you like the sound of that? Get away from these bombs for a while."

"We will, of course, be happy to pay your expenses," the lawyer said.

"Gosh," Harry's mother said. "A free trip to the seaside, Harry. Or …"

She turned to the lawyer.

"Wickford Hall is on the coast, isn't it?" she asked.

"Oh yes," he said. "Very much so."





Again the lawyer looked as if he was going to say more, but instead he folded his fingers together and said that he had to be going.

"I'm going to Suffolk myself this afternoon," he said. "I have taken the liberty of arranging train tickets for you and your son for tomorrow, if that suits."

"I dare say we'll manage to make the journey, won't we, Harry?" Harry's mother said. "You might have to miss a couple of days at school."

Mr Williams shook Harry's mother by the hand and nodded to Harry. He put on his hat, picked up his briefcase and umbrella, then took his leave.

Harry peered out of the window as Mr Williams walked off up the street. When he got to the corner he turned and looked back at their house for a moment. Then he shook his head and walked on.

Harry had a strong feeling that there was more to this business than the lawyer was letting on, but he didn't have the heart to say anything to his mother. Besides, it was only a hunch – what would he have said?

But the niggling doubt wouldn't go away. It seemed like such good news. What could possibly be wrong? Maybe Harry had just forgotten how to enjoy life.

For the 100th time, Harry wished his father was there. He wished he could talk to him and ask him what he thought. In fact, he just wished that his father could take care of everything and leave Harry to be a boy again.

Harry felt sure his father would have had doubts about the lawyer too. But he wasn't there. He was never coming back and that was that.