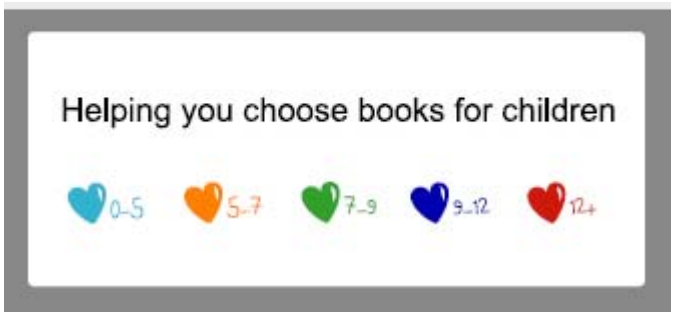
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opening extract from

Historical House: Andie's Moon

written by

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Andie's Moon

Chapter One

Fly me to the Moon

Andie didn't know where she was – only that something had woken her, and she was staring into darkness.

She sat up, clutching her pillow. The room came into focus: dark shapes of wardrobe and chest of drawers; tall, light rectangles of curtained windows. It wasn't her own bedroom, cluttered and square, with its one small window where the street light shone in; this was a much larger space. From the other bed, farthest from the door, came soft steady breathing.

Of course. She was in the Chelsea flat – this strange new place that seemed so grand and spacious. This was her first night in the room she and Prune were to share, the bedroom that was really Anne Rutherford's. The door to the hall was open, but there were no lights on, so Mum and Dad must have gone to bed too. Andie pummelled her pillow into a comfortable hollow, rolled over and settled for sleep – then heard, again, the sound that had got into her dream and woken her. Across the ceiling, directly above her bed, creaked the slow tread of feet.

She sat up and groped for the switch of her bedside lamp.

"Prune!" she called softly. "Prune! There's a burglar or something!"

Prune was a heavy sleeper. Andie had to cross the carpet and shake her by the shoulder before she stirred, and by that time the creaking had stopped.

"Wassamatter?" Prune muttered.

"There's someone creeping about!"

"What? Mmm. You are." Prune propped herself on one elbow and pushed her hair out of her eyes.

"No, listen! There's someone on the floor above – I heard footsteps."

"P'raps someone lives up there. Or you were dreaming. Go back to sleep."

Rolling over to face the wall, Prune tugged the sheet up to her ears. Andie climbed back into bed, and looked at her watch. Ten past midnight. Not a sound from above now; maybe she'd only imagined the footsteps. She clicked off the lamp, and lay staring up at the high ceiling, wondering what was beyond it.

That man from downstairs, Patrick, who'd shown them round, had said something about attic rooms where servants used to live, but he hadn't mentioned anyone living there now. Why would someone be creeping around the attic at midnight?

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Andie felt a shiver of excitement run through her. This was so different from home, which, in comparison to Number Six, Chelsea Walk, seemed very dull – a brick semi, identical to all the others nearby. This house was old – built in seventeen hundred and something. Who would even know how many people had lived here, over the years? It had been a big family house, Patrick had told them, before it was divided into flats. Imagine, one family having this whole huge place to themselves! They must have been incredibly rich. When Andie thought of all the different people who must have walked up and down the stairs and moved through these rooms and slept in the house and breathed its air, she felt dizzy. It was like looking through the wrong end of a telescope, back into history. She was vague about the details, but she imagined a procession of people, their clothes and faces and hair getting more and more old-fashioned, all the way back to seventeen-hundred-and-whatever-it-was. They crowded into her mind, in black-and-white photographs at first, then portraits in oval frames.

Not only did this house have three floors, each one a separate flat, but it had the attic and a cellar as well – making it, Andie thought, a five-storey house, really. As soon as Patrick mentioned the attic, she'd pictured herself sitting up there with her paints and an easel. She hadn't got an easel, but to be the kind of painter who sat in an attic, she'd need to get one somehow.

If it was a bit sparse up there, just bare boards, so much the better. That would make her feel like a proper artist.

But the noise. The footsteps.

What if something awful had happened here, and someone was prowling about the attic at night, unhappy, or seeking revenge?

No. Andie didn't believe in ghosts. She definitely didn't.

She pushed back her bedclothes and swung her feet to the carpet. Careful not to wake Prune again, she tiptoed to the window and looked out. She could hear traffic, along the Embankment, and over the nearby bridge; through the foliage of the trees that fronted Chelsea Walk she saw the glow of street lamps, and, beyond, the glimmer of water that was the River Thames. At home in Slough, in their cul-de-sac, the nights were quiet apart from the odd late car returning home, but Andie supposed that London never slept. There was a hum of busyness, even at this late hour.

And above it all hung the moon, the full moon, cool and silver, the same moon that Andie saw when she looked up from her own garden at home.

Wasn't there a saying, she thought, about it being unlucky to look at the moon through glass? Or was it only looking at the new moon through glass? Not wanting to bring bad luck, not on the first night of her stay in London, she pushed up the lower pane of the sash window and kneeled on the floor, her elbows on the sill. Now she could gaze as much as she wanted, with the night air fresh on her face.

When she was little, Andie pretended to see the Man in the Moon, because Dad used to tell her a story about him. She liked to imagine that the moon's greeny-blue shadows formed the outline of a face, a wise and good-humoured face. The Man, she thought, was smiling at her. He was hard to make out, but perhaps that was why

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not everyone could see him. He only appeared to especially observant people, and Andie liked to think she was one of those.

Now, everyone was talking about man on the moon, because in a fortnight's time the American astronauts would not only fly to the moon, but land there. Just thinking about it gave Andie a thrill of excitement and disbelief. Did the moon know?

"Fly me to the Moon" – that was one of the songs on Mum's favourite Frank Sinatra record. The familiar tune started to sing itself in Andie's head; because of Apollo 11, it was always being played on the radio this summer. Soon, flying to the moon wouldn't be the fantasy it had once been. But, gazing at it now – at her moon, the moon she always looked for, and the moon she used to think looked back at her – Andie couldn't quite take in that this was the same place they were aiming for. The moon was Earth's mysterious companion, keeping half of itself always hidden. The space rockets seemed like ropes, lassoes, thrown out to catch and tether it and bring it closer. Apollo 10 had already orbited, with three astronauts aboard, and they'd seen what no human had ever seen before – the far side of the moon.

Mystery, or discovery? Which was better? And could you have both?

A moonscape began to form in her mind, sharp, clear and perfect. It was far better than she'd ever be able to achieve with paints and brush; but there it was, demanding to be painted. Tomorrow she'd do it.

She crept back into bed, hearing, as she did so, another small creak from above. Andie froze, listening.

"Prune?" she whispered. "Are you awake?"

But Prune gave no sign of having heard. Andie stayed where she was for a few more moments, ears straining. Then, hearing no more, she gave up, lay down, and closed her eyes firmly.

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