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opening extract from

Historical House: Josie Under Fire

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JOSIE UNDER FIRE

Chapter One

A Move to Chelsea

The house had changed. Silly, of course, to have expected it to look the same, but Josie remembered it from visits before the war began: a big five-storey house of red brick, solid and strong – a house that looked as if it would remain unchanged for ever.

The bushes in the garden had been hacked back, revealing a surprisingly large space in which spring cabbages and onions were growing. A few daffodils showed tight yellow buds. Josie looked up and saw that every one of the windows was criss-crossed with brown sticky tape.

Her mother opened the gate and they carried Josie's suitcase up a short flight of stone steps to the front door. Josie glanced down into the basement area and saw sandbags piled against the walls. The windows were boarded up.

"Is that where they shelter?" she asked. At home in Greenwich she and her mother had an Anderson shelter in the garden.

"I think so." Her mother looked momentarily anxious before she said, in a bracing tone, "You'll be just as safe here as at Granny's. Safer, probably. And you'll be with Edith. You'll enjoy that."

"Yes."

But it would be strange, Josie thought, staying with her cousin. She'd often visited for the day, but never stayed. And although the families had always been friendly it might be different now, because of Ted.

"Do they know?" she asked. "About Ted? Does Edith know?"

"We told Aunty Grace and Uncle Walter. I doubt if they'd tell Edith. And Aunty Grace wouldn't gossip. The neighbours won't know."

No, thought Josie, Aunty Grace was always polite and correct. And if she felt differently about Josie now, she wouldn't show it. But Edith…?

The bell push was labelled "Felgate". It was the only one because the tenants of the upstairs flats used the back entrance. Her mother pressed the bell.

The door opened, and Josie's aunt was there, and Edith beside her, and behind them the grand, high-ceilinged hall with its floor of black and white marble tiles.

Aunty Grace gave Josie her cool kiss that smelled of face powder. "My goodness, Josie, you've grown!" she said.

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Josie blushed. She seemed to be growing fast these days, and preferred it not to be commented on. She glanced at her cousin, who was also twelve. Edith did look bigger, and her face was less chubby and childish, but she still had that prettiness – dark curls and a dimple when she smiled – that Josie, with her straight fair hair and glasses, had always envied.

Aunty Grace drew Josie's mother towards the kitchen, where they chatted as the kettle was put on to boil.

Biddy, the Felgates' little black cat, crept out into the hall, and Edith scooped her up. "Here's Josie come to

see you."

Josie stroked the cat. Her own pet, a spaniel named Russ, was being looked after by a neighbour in Greenwich, and she knew she would miss him.

Edith smiled at Josie over the cat's head. "You can come to my school," she said. "Mummy arranged it with Miss Hallam."

"Is she your teacher?"

"Yes. There are only two left now, Miss Hallam and Miss Gregory. All the others have joined the Services. And a lot of the girls were evacuated and haven't come back. We just go in the mornings."

Josie thought of her school in Greenwich. That was only part-time, too, but it was enough. She remembered the name calling, the way she was shut out of things, the way even some of the teachers had cooled towards her. Surely it would be better here, among strangers?

"Come and have some tea, girls!" Edith's mother called.

They followed her into the enormous oak-panelled living room with its expanse of carpet in dark floral patterns. Biddy escaped from Edith's arms and made straight for the hearthrug in front of the fire.

Josie, looking around, remembered that in the past this room had always had tall vases of cut flowers in it, whatever was in season; Aunty Grace had a regular order at the florist's. Not now. There were no flowers at all, and the pale damask curtains that framed the long windows were half-hidden behind bulky blackout drapes.

On the mantelpiece were several framed family photographs. Josie's eyes were drawn to one of a smiling young man: her cousin Peter, Edith's brother. Peter wore flying goggles pushed up over his leather helmet, and a padded jacket with the collar turned out to reveal its fleece lining; the straps of a parachute harness could be seen around his shoulders and hips; and behind him was his plane – a Spitfire. Josie glanced at her mother and saw that she too had seen the photograph.

A fire was burning in the grate, and tea was laid on a low table: china cups, white napkins, even some biscuits. They sat down, and Aunty Grace handed out little rose-patterned plates. Josie immediately felt anxious that she might drop crumbs or say

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something insufficiently polite. The Felgates were so formal, so stilted in their conversation. And yet Edith, she remembered, had always been a secretly disobedient child, bubbling under the polite surface, much naughtier than Josie once their parents were out of sight. Would she have changed?

“Pass Josie another biscuit, Edith,” Aunty Grace said.

The biscuits were not as good as they looked. They tasted dry; one of those fat-free recipes from The Kitchen Front, Josie guessed.

Nevertheless, biscuits were biscuits, and she and Edith ate several each while their mothers talked about Josie’s grandmother, who had fallen in the blackout and broken her hip. She needed her daughter to come and stay for a few weeks – which was why Josie was here.

Josie sensed Edith’s impatience as she waited for a pause in the conversation. When it came she asked her mother, “May I show Josie our room?”

“Yes, of course, dear. Run along.”

It was a relief to leave. They went across the hall and into the small bedroom that until recently Edith had shared with her sister Moira. Josie had always liked her cousins’ room. It was pretty, with a white-painted dressing table and pink eiderdowns – a proper girls’ room that made her own bedroom at home seem ordinary. Josie’s mother didn’t bother much about the house. She had always worked from home as a freelance journalist, and throughout her childhood Josie had been aware of the disapproval of some of the neighbours: married women were supposed to devote themselves to home and family. Until now. Now it was different, and her mother had told her that even Aunty Grace worked, unpaid, for the WVS.

“You can have Moira’s bed,” said Edith.

“Where is she now?” Josie knew Moira had joined the WAAF a few weeks ago.

“East Anglia. Mummy’s worrying about her. And about Peter, of course.”

She moved to shut the bedroom door. “Want to see something?”

“What?”

Edith opened the wardrobe and reached deep inside. She brought out what looked like a drawstring shoe bag made of striped sheeting. “Have a look.”

The bag was full of shrapnel from bomb sites. There were several bullets. Josie took them out and weighed them in her hand. They were heavy, dull silver, dented where they’d hit the ground. There was some glass, too, fragments of stained-glass window in deep reds and blues.

“That’s from the Catholic church,” said Edith. “There was a massive hit. All the people sheltering in the crypt were killed. Hilda Rodway – she goes to my school – her cousin was in there.”

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Josie brought out some small sheared-off bits of metal – and then a watch with a shattered face, stopped at a quarter past six.

“That’s when the bomb went off,” said Edith. Josie could see that her cousin was particularly proud of this souvenir.

“How horrible.” But there was a fascination about the watch, about the thought of that moment when time stopped for someone.

Edith put the things away and hid the bag in the wardrobe. “Don’t tell Mummy. I’m not allowed to collect shrapnel.”

Edith hasn’t changed, Josie thought. She wondered what they would do together in the afternoons, when they weren’t at school. She remembered, from family visits, climbing the walnut tree in the back garden and, in autumn, collecting the nuts, some to be eaten fresh and the rest pickled. In colder weather they had played in the strange, dead-end space at the top of the stairs – a space that had always fascinated Josie.

Edith seemed to guess her thoughts. “Let’s go up to the landing.”

They went into the hall and through the archway to what had once been the grand staircase, the centre of a big house. Now the stairs, although richly carpeted in Turkish red, led nowhere. The girls ran up them, reached a landing, turned the corner and faced three steps that stopped at a blank wall. Beyond that wall, Josie knew, was the first-floor flat.

The Felgate children had always made the landing a play space, though Aunty Grace had worried about them falling downstairs. There were still boxes of Ludo and Snakes and Ladders on the top step, some Girls’ Own annuals, and an open box full of toy soldiers. Aunty Grace had encouraged quiet games here. But sometimes, when Josie visited, Edith would fetch shawls and fans from the dressing-up box in her bedroom, and the two of them would parade up and down the great staircase, pretending to be the Victorian ladies who once lived here. Or the landing would become a stage and they’d persuade the older ones – Peter, Ted and Moira – to put on plays with them. Often, though, they would just sit in the hidey-hole at the top and chat and giggle, which is what they did now.

“Who’s in your class at school?” Josie asked. “What are they like?”

“Clare Barrington, Pam Denham: they’re my friends. Nina Parton; Sylvia Wells; Iris Gray… They’re all quite good sorts except Alice Hampton: she’s peculiar.”

“What sort of peculiar?”

“Oh, teacher’s pet. Brainbox. No one likes her. We’re mixed ages, ten to thirteen, because of the war and doubling up the classes. Part of the school got bombed; we’ve had tons of bombing –”

“So have we!” exclaimed Josie, not to be outdone.

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“And we’ve had to go part-time,” Edith continued, “because there’s not enough shelter space for all of us. But Miss Hallam’s nice. And it’s good fun in the air raids. We do quizzes and plays and things.”

It’ll be so much better here, Josie thought. Edith’s my cousin and she’ll be my friend. And no one will turn against me because they won’t know about Ted.

Edith had begun fiddling with the toy soldiers. She took a few out and stood them on the stair. She glanced sidelong at Josie. “Is Ted a pacifist?” she asked.

And Josie realized that Edith did know.

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