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Opening extract from

The Victory Dogs

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Chapter 1

London, 1940

Misty had a bed of her own, by the fire downstairs, but she always chose to lie on Jack's bed. The soft, cream-coated dog with floppy ears yawned and stretched her large pregnant tummy out across the bed and watched as her beloved owner twisted the green woollen tie round his neck and then undid it again with a loud sigh.

Twelve-year-old Amy watched her older brother too.

'Can I help?' she asked him.

But Jack shook his head. He'd have to manage it by himself once he was in the army.

'Why do things like tying ties and shoelaces have to be so tricky?' he said.

Misty gave a soft whine as if she were agreeing with him.

Amy stroked Misty's furry head and began

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reciting the rhyme they'd been taught at school to help them remember how to knot their ties:

'*The hare sees the fox and hops over the log, under the log, around the log once . . . around the log twice . . . and dives into his hole . . . safe and sound.*'

Jack grinned and finally managed to get the tie tied. But no sooner had he done so than Misty started scratching frantically at the brown candlewick bedspread, tearing at it with her paws and biting at it with her teeth.

'Misty, no!' said Jack.

Misty stopped, mid-scratch, and looked over at him, her soft brown eyes staring straight into his.

She'd been acting very oddly over the past few days – crying and hiding in corners and under the kitchen dresser, ripping Jack and Amy's father's newspaper to shreds before he'd even had a chance to read it. She'd already pulled the bedspread off Jack's bed twice and bundled it up on the floor.

Destructive behaviour like this wasn't like Misty at all. Ever since she'd been a puppy she had been a steady, gentle sort of dog.

At first, they'd thought that somehow she knew Jack was going away and this was her way of saying she wanted him to stay. But then they'd realized that Misty was in fact pregnant. Once they knew that, her behaviour seemed perfectly

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natural – they just had to remind her not to act like that indoors!

'She's trying to make a nest again!' said Amy. 'To find somewhere safe for her puppies to be born.'

'Good girl, Misty,' Jack said. 'You're all right.'

He sat down on the bed beside the dog his mother and father had finally got him, after years of begging, six years ago. A black-and-white photo of Misty was on the cabinet next to his bed all ready for him to pack and take with him.

This was going to be Misty's first litter of puppies and Jack was gutted that he was going to miss it.

'If only I could be here with her,' he said for the hundredth time.

But they both knew he couldn't be. Jack was eighteen and had had his call-up papers to join the army. His orders were to report to the basic training camp first thing in the morning to fulfil his military service duty. After that, he'd be going to the front. There was no way out of it.

'It's Jack who should be all jittery, not you,' Amy told Misty as Jack pulled at the green woollen tie that was half strangling him. 'He's the one going off to war. All you're going to be doing is having pups – and that'll be lovely.'

Misty pressed herself close to Jack and then crawled on to his lap as if she were still a young puppy. He could feel her heart racing. He kissed the top of Misty's furry head. He was going to miss

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her so badly. She'd slept on his bed every night for the past six years, ever since she'd come to live with them as a ten-week-old puppy. He didn't know how he was going to sleep without her there.

Misty stretched up her neck so Jack could scratch under her chin.

'Promise you'll take good care of her?' he said to Amy.

'I promise,' she said. 'Two walks a day and all the treats I'm allowed to give her. She can sleep in my room if she likes, but I bet she'll keep sleeping in your room as usual, waiting on your bed for you to come home.'

Jack's leaving was probably going to be hardest for Misty. She couldn't be expected to understand where he'd gone or why he had to go. All she'd know was that he'd left her.

'Make sure you give her lots of strokes,' said Jack.

Amy smiled. She knew how much Jack loved Misty and what an important task he was entrusting to her.

'At least a thousand strokes a day,' she said.

Amy couldn't imagine what the house was going to be like without Jack there. But she was sure it would be a sadder, lonelier place without him. He was six years older than her and some big brothers might not have liked their little sister tagging along with them all the time. But Jack wasn't like that. He was the best big brother in the world.

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Amy swallowed down the lump in her throat. Now was not the time for crying. She had to be strong for Jack and Misty, and told herself she wasn't the only one having to say goodbye. Amy knew that hundreds of people up and down the country were saying goodbye to the people they loved as more and more men and boys were called up. They too would be frightened and worried about when they'd see each other again.

At first, the war had felt very far away from Amy's world, but no one doubted England was truly at war now. At school they were growing vegetables on the playing field and knitting scarves and socks to keep the soldiers warm. But Amy wished there was something more she could do to help with the war effort. Anything for it to be over with as soon as possible.

'I'm glad she has you,' Jack said as he stroked Misty.

He stood up and pushed his arms into the suit jacket. Then he laced up the shoes he'd polished so hard he could see his reflection in them.

'Ready to show Mum and Dad?' he said. Jack was trying on his dad's suit to wear the next morning – it felt a bit like getting ready for the first day of school.

Misty jumped awkwardly off the bed and followed Jack and Amy as they went down the stairs.

The front door was open and there was a bucket

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beside it. Once a week, regular as clockwork, their mother, Mrs Dolan, cleaned the front doorstep until it shone. Most of their neighbours did the same. Mrs Dolan stood up as soon as she saw Jack.

'Oh, son,' she said, her voice breaking at the sight of her boy going off to war in his father's best suit. She clenched her floral apron tightly in her fist to stop herself from welling up. 'Your father will be so proud.'

Doorstep forgotten and cleaning materials abandoned, she led Jack to the front room where his father was waiting. This room had their best furniture and ornaments in it and was reserved for visitors and special occasions. There was a black upright piano in the corner, a floral patterned sofa, two armchairs and a print of a seascape on the wall. Mrs Dolan closed the door so Misty couldn't follow them inside as she was never allowed in the sitting room.

'Here he is, all grown up,' Mrs Dolan said as her unbidden tears turned to sobs. 'And going off to fight.'

'Hush, mother,' Mr Dolan told her, and she sniffed and wiped her tears away on her apron. 'Our boy needs you to be strong.'

Mrs Dolan nodded, not trusting herself to speak. Amy took her mother's hand and squeezed it gently.

Misty stared at the closed sitting-room door for a moment and then padded along the hallway to

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the open front door and sniffed. There was a lazy late Saturday afternoon feeling in the soft, warm air. She didn't attempt to go out. She'd never been tempted to stray although there'd been opportunities aplenty in the past, but the air with its myriad smells from the street was too interesting not to sniff. Next-door's dog, over-the-road's cat, the three round metal pig bins by the lamp post all made her sensitive nose twitch.

She watched as a boy emptied the scraps from his family's breakfast and Saturday lunch into one of them, waving his hand to ward off the host of bluebottles that buzzed round him.

Every few days the bins were collected and sent to local farms where they were emptied into the pigs' troughs before being returned and quickly filled up again.

Misty stepped out on to the front-garden path and sniffed. But then she heard a strange sound, little more than a hum, like a soft insect drone at first. Too quiet for a human ear to detect, but Misty heard it. It grew louder and louder. Misty hurried to the closed door of the sitting room and whined softly.

Inside the room Amy was the first to hear the distant but steady drone.

'What's that noise?' she asked.

The sound was strangely ominous and her parents looked at each other uneasily.

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'What is it?' she repeated, her voice now fearful as the noise grew ever louder.

'Plane engines!' said Jack.

Outside in the hallway Misty whined and scratched at the door more frantically. Then came the sound of the siren, wailing faintly at first, but soon growing louder and louder until it was deafening. In a panic, Misty ran from the hallway, out of the house and down the front path and along the street, on and on, desperate to get away from the dreadful wailing that filled her head, thinking only of protecting her unborn pups.

As the air-raid siren joined the sound of the planes, Mr Dolan grabbed his wife's hand. They'd been warned that there could be bombs at any time, but were not expecting them just before teatime on a warm September afternoon.

'Bombs!' he shouted. 'Out to the shelter, quickly!'

The four of them ran from the sitting room through the kitchen door and out into the back garden, past the outside toilet, to the Anderson shelter at the rear. Mr Dolan pulled away the sacking he'd used to cover the small opening and helped his wife and daughter down the shortened ladder.

'In you go.'

'Misty!' Jack shouted. He turned back to fetch her, but his father grabbed his arm firmly and wouldn't let go when Jack tried to pull away.

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'No, son, you can't go back. She'll be fine,' he said and he dragged Jack into the shelter, holding his arm so tightly his fingers pinched into his son's flesh.

'But . . .'

'You stay,' Mr Dolan insisted.

Inside the shelter they huddled together as other sirens joined the first, wailing their terrible warning. Jack and Amy fretted about Misty and longed for the all-clear to sound, but they didn't try to go out before it did. In the distance they could hear people screaming and the sound of the planes, followed by a piercing whistling as they dropped their bombs.

Amy's mum clasped Amy to her as a bomb exploded somewhere in the distance, but still near enough to make the earth shake and their ears ring with its horrible, dreadful, ear-wrenching loudness. Inside the Anderson shelter it was dark, but outside the sun still shone. They all instinctively shielded their heads with their hands as more bombs followed the first; they seemed to be exploding all around them. Shrapnel and debris showered down on the top of the shelter for what felt like hours.

Misty ran through the North London streets like a wild thing, heart racing, with no sense or care as to where she was going, until finally she slowed down and could run no more. She was six years old, the

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equivalent of middle-aged in human years, and no puppy any more.

She panted with exhaustion as, long after it had first started, the sirens' wailing finally stopped. But the panic around her didn't. People ran this way and that, stumbled and fell, lost shoes and sometimes stopped to pick them up, but more often left them abandoned, not daring to delay.

No one had any time to pay attention to Misty or even notice that she was lost and alone. They were too busy running for safety themselves to hear her whimpering or see her trembling.

Misty wasn't as confident as some dogs. She'd always been more hesitant, reserved, and, although she loved to be stroked, she wouldn't push herself forward unless she was sure of her welcome – even within her own family. So she didn't approach any of the passing strangers.

One woman, wearing a bottle-green scarf, half stopped, but she was pulled away by her friend.

'The very least you'll get is fleas.'

'Poor thing – doesn't look like a stray. I can see its registration disc.'

Misty took a hopeful step towards them and the woman who said she had fleas waved her handbag at her.

'Go on, scat!'

Misty immediately backed off. Head down, she padded on aimlessly, quite lost for the first time in

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her life. And now she had more than just herself to worry about. There were the puppies that had been growing inside her for the past two months. She could feel them moving. What's more, she knew instinctively that they were almost ready to be born.

Someone ran past her saying, 'Not today, not today, not today,' over and over. London had been warned about the bombings for so long, no one could quite believe it was actually happening now.

'Three hundred planes . . .'

'I heard more . . .'

'Bombs . . .'

'Targeting the South London docks . . .' said the passing voices.

Tentatively Misty approached a passer-by dragging a dog by its lead, but she backed away quickly when the owner yelled at her.

'Get away!'

Soon the sirens' wail started again and more people rushed past Misty. She started to run again too, although her paws ached and she was heavy with the pups. All she really wanted to do was lie down and sleep.

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