**AIR-RAID!**

Charlie lay in his bed and listened to the sounds of London outside. In the days before the war, the night-time city had roared to the noise of buses, cars, and people even at in the early hours of the morning. But now, it was if the beast had been tamed and broken by the years of fighting and hardship, and only muted whispers came to him through his bedroom window.

The boy turned his head on the cool pillow, closed his eyes and tried to sleep. Charlie wasn’t used to the quiet. This *special* quiet, anyway. It made him nervous. Limehouse, in the East End of London, was never this quiet. And to be honest, Charlie wasn’t sure why it stayed quiet. Being so close to the docks, this area of the city had been more prone to air raids than many others. It was only the other week that the sugar factory, Tate & Lyle, had been hit and the night sky and the River Thames had burned gas blue and the air had smelt of candyfloss and caramel.

Just as Charlie was beginning to dream of fairgrounds frequented by clowns made of liquorice nibs and sugar mice, a low drone that rose quickly to a scream, woke the boy from his sleep. Charlie sat bolt upright in bed, his hands already clutching the bedclothes tight, his knuckles white. Air-raid. And it sounded close. The screaming whine was now punctuated with deep booming sounds which caused Charlie’s whole house to shake and his bed to jiggle around on the wooden floor.

Pulling back the tiniest corner of his blackout curtain, Charlie stared out of his bedroom window into the black night. The darkness was criss-crossed with the wide, white beams of the searchlights which played across the night sky like the opening of a movie at the local cinema. Not that they had a local cinema anymore. That had been reduced to rubble last month. Charlie had managed to salvage a poster from The Wizard of Oz for his sister from the bombsite with only the minimum of scorch marks around the edges. As the screaming of the air-raid siren reached fever pitch, the boy wished he had a pair of ruby slippers to take him anywhere but London. And anywhere but London in the middle of an air- raid.

Suddenly the room seemed to lurch as *something* ploughed into the ground outside the house, causing Charlie to throw himself back across the covers and dive under the bed as the explosion rippled outwards in a pool of crimson, yellow and orange, sending the glass in the window bursting inwards in millions of diamond fragments that glowed like burning stars.

From his coward position under the bed, Charlie looked at his burning floor that glittered evilly up at him and cursed that his slippers were by the bedroom door. A greasy black pall rolled across the ceiling like a writhing spectre and Charlie knew at once that the room was on fire. He had to move. Now!

Rolling himself out from under the bed, the boy winced as the fragments of glass bit into his pyjamas. He was glad for once of the thickness of the striped winceyette material that his mother had picked out, even though he did resemble a deckchair. His mother! In the awfulness of the moment, Charlie had forgotten about his mother and sister! They were out at an evening with the Spring’s at number fourteen. He had said he’d be alright on his own. After all, he was nearly twelve. Charlie hoped they had managed to get to one of the public shelters in time.

Slowly, oh so slowly, Charlie crawled across the glass-gritted floor, pulling his hands into the arms of his pyjamas as much as he could to protect them from the glass that glittered wickedly at him, although he could feel shards like knives prickling at his toes and a ferocious heat on his back, although he didn’t dare look up. He didn’t trust himself to. At least not yet.

Reaching the door and his slippers, Charlie pulled himself up by the door frame, slid his feet into them (and was annoyed to find some glass fragments had found their way inside) and looked back round at his room. He wished he hadn’t. The whole of the window side had gone and the black sky outside loomed into his room like the entrance to hell, framed by pillars of burning wood. As Charlie watched with ever widening eyes, the floor on which his bed sat, collapsed, and down into the front room below, in a bellowing roar and a shower of sparks. A sheet of flame billowed up from the pit, and the boy felt his face beginning to burn, as he stared into the tumultuous red corona that churned where the front room had once been.

Charlie bolted from the room, out onto the landing and made straight for the stairs. He stopped short as the stairs themselves were a writhing knot of red and orange snakes that spat their tongues of deadly fire up at him. Through a grey haze, Charlie could just make out the empty space where the front door had been, mocking him, just out of reach. Like the turning page of a storybook, the image vanished as the banister folded inwards and the downstairs of the house vanished into the inferno.

Using words under his breath that he’d heard his mother use when she’d found out he’d used her good tights as a makeshift catapult to get his own back on the hideous Nelson twins at number four when they had ganged up and kissed him at the Christmas party at school, humiliating him beyond belief in front of his mates, Charlie ran into the bathroom, the only room that seemed to have escaped the blast. As he did so, he noticed the poster of The Wizard of Oz in his sister’s room. The Emerald City was ablaze. He only hoped Dorothy had clicked her heels in time.

Slamming the bathroom door behind him, Charlie considered his options as he looked around the small, tiled room. His family had been considered ‘posh’ in the street, having their own indoor bathroom whilst the rest of the street had to make do with an old tin bath on the kitchen floor. They wouldn’t be considered ‘posh’ now. They had no house to go with the bathroom.

Charlie pulled up the small sash window above the sink and took in a great lungsful of frosty night air. Already he could hear the crackling of flames, feel the heat behind the bathroom door and smelled the bonfire smell of burning wood mixed with the iron tang of lead paint. If the heat didn’t get him, the smoke and the fumes would. He looked up at the stars that glistened and stared back at him cold and impassively. He’d learnt at school that the stars were thought to be the heroes of old, fixed forever in the night sky by the gods so that they would be remembered forever. At that moment, Charlie remembered his dad, *his* hero, lost out there somewhere on the battlefields of Europe, and pictured him up there looking down on him. One star seemed to shine back brighter at him as if to say, *‘Now, Charlie boy, it’s your turn to be a hero. You can do it!’*

Charlie wiped the tear from his eye, sighed and looked down at the street below. It seemed a long way down. Ah, well, he reasoned, better a broken neck than to be cremated at twelve. Death would at least be messy, but exciting. Slowly and carefully, Charlie eased himself through the window and onto the ledge outside. He’d never liked heights. Holding the now hot window frame behind him, Charlie glanced wildly around him and noticed the rusting metal drainpipe that ran down the side of the house to the ground. The ground… what a glorious thought. Now, could he reach it? Gingerly, Charlie reluctantly let go of the window frame with one hand and reached out towards the pipe. His fingers curled gratefully around cold, hard metal. His heart in his mouth, Charlie swung himself off the window ledge and round the drainpipe, just as the bathroom window flamed red and the Nazi dragon within roared in triumph.

Charlie clutched and clung to the rusting pipe, his feet scrabbling and fumbling for a notch or hold until they found the brackets that held the thing to the wall. The boy didn’t dare look down, instead he stared determinedly upwards towards the heavens at the one bright star that shone back at him out of the black sky. Keeping his eyes fixed on the star, on where he felt his *dad* was watching from his place in the heavens, watching *him*, Charlie carefully and cautiously began to inch his way down the pipe, feeling the icy metal almost burn beneath his fingers. He hadn’t noticed that he had reached the ground until he felt warm hands pull him to them and found himself buried in the arms of his mother and sister. But Charlie still stared up at the star that seemed to wink back at him as if in approval.

“Thanks, dad,” the boy muttered under his breath.

Somewhere across the city of London, the air-raid siren screamed on…