The BLITZ SISTERS

About the Author

Judith Eagle is the critically acclaimed author of *The Secret Starling*, *The Pear Affair*, *The Accidental Stowaway*, *The Stolen Songbird* and *The Great Theatre Rescue*. Her books have been Waterstones Book of the Month and have been shortlisted for the Edward Stanford Children's Travel Book of the Year Award and the Young Quills Award for Best Historical Fiction. Over the years she has worked for fashion magazines and in school libraries, and now – her favourite thing – she writes stories. She lives in London with her family and her rescue cat, Stockwell.

ALSO BY JUDITH EAGLE

The Great Theatre Rescue
The Secret Starling
The Pear Affair
The Accidental Stowaway
The Stolen Songbird

Faber has published children's books since 1929. T. S. Eliot's *Old Possum's Book of Practical Cats* and Ted Hughes' *The Iron Man* were amongst the first. Our catalogue at the time said that 'it is by reading such books that children learn the difference between the shoddy and the genuine'. We still believe in the power of reading to transform children's lives. All our books are chosen with the express intention of growing a love of reading, a thirst for knowledge and to cultivate empathy. We pride ourselves on responsible editing. Last but not least, we believe in kind and inclusive books in which all children feel represented and important.

The BLITZ SISTERS

JUDITH EAGLE

faber

First published in 2026
by Faber & Faber Limited
The Bindery,
51 Hatton Garden,
London, EC1N 8HN
faber.co.uk

Printed by CPI Group (UK) Ltd, Croydon CR0 4YY

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

ISBN 978–0–571–38870–7

Printed and bound in the UK on FSC® certified paper in line with our continuing commitment to ethical business practices, sustainability and the environment.
For further information see faber.co.uk/environmental-policy

Our authorised representative in the EU for product safety is
Easy Access System Europe, Mustamäe tee 50, 10621 Tallinn, Estonia
gpsr.requests@easproject.com

2 4 6 8 10 9 7 5 3 1

For Rose and Poppy, with much love.

Part One

Lydia: The Blitz
1939–1940

The first time Teddy saw her gas mask, she screamed.

Peggy immediately rushed to comfort her little sister.

Lydia laughed.

And it wasn't just a harmless chuckle either. It was a full-throated, roaring belly laugh. The kind that seems to shake walls, and made Lydia double over, and turned her face a shuddering beetroot red.

'Scaredy-cat!' she said between guffaws.

'Don't be so horrible, Lydia!' exclaimed Peg, giving her sister a giant shove and her fiercest stare. Dad had liked to joke that Peggy's stare could kill at a thousand paces. It didn't kill Lydia though. She leaned in and gave Peg a giant shove back.

They were in the queue at the Air-Raid Precautions headquarters on Camden High Street, along with all the other families from the surrounding streets, there to collect the ghastly rubber contraptions that the government had decided every single person, even babies, was to be issued with. In case there was a war. And in case Hitler decided to shower everyone with deadly poison. A fact that Lydia had

read about in one of the many information leaflets that had been posted through the door, and that Mum had tried to hide from her.

The wardens, who were in charge of distributing the dreaded things, cast disapproving looks in the sisters' direction, which just made Lydia want to laugh and shove even more.

She'd been sort of *constrained* for ages. Always trying so hard to be helpful, not being any trouble. But she was scared. And laughing was a way of hiding her feelings. Now she felt a kind of freedom. Like a river that had burst its banks.

'Stop it!' said Mum, coming up behind them. Mum's face, framed by the auburn wisps that were forever escaping her tortoiseshell combs, was tight with worry. She had told them to go ahead while she stopped to buy the last of the day's bread from Godfreys, which meant it was a penny cheaper than usual.

'Lydia, this isn't like you!' she said.

Immediately, Lydia gulped down the laughter and stopped shoving. She could stand the wardens' disappointed stares, but not Mum's. Not after everything that had happened in the past year. Dad dying. Finding out they'd almost run out of money. Saying goodbye to Mrs Jessop who had helped with the cooking and the cleaning and the washing; moving out of their comfortable but

ramshackle cottage in Hampstead and into the cramped rooms of Caldicott House in Camden Town; changing schools; making new friends (not that Lydia had had much success in that quarter – she had been far too busy looking after everyone); Mum working in the hat shop.

For ages and ages they'd been treating each other as if they were pieces of fine bone china, not daring to mention Dad in case the cracks began to appear. Mum cried (it seemed like she cried all the time) which was frightening because none of them were used to seeing grown-ups cry; Lydia's chest felt like it was trapped in a steel corset; Peggy's face turned to stone.

Not Teddy though. *She* seemed untouched. *She* talked about Dad whenever she felt like it, as if he was still here, as if he might pop out of his garden studio at any minute, and catch hold of her feet, and whirl her around like a spinning top.

Sometimes Lydia wanted to shake her little sister and tell her to shut up. Couldn't she see the damage her words were doing?

But she didn't.

Of course she didn't.

She stayed tight-lipped and, instead, poured it all out to Mrs Jessop on one of her many visits to Bethnal Green.

'Teddy's only little. Let her speak,' Mrs Jessop advised. 'You could, all of you, do with talking to each other a bit

more in my honest opinion.' And Lydia had known in her heart of hearts that Mrs Jessop was right. Getting things out into the open *was* important. But how could she do that? She was terrified of what might happen if she tried. What if Mum never stopped crying? What if Peggy turned to stone for all *eternity* and never got any of her softness back?

So she had a good sob and leaned her head against Mrs Jessop's large bosom.

Which was very comforting.

That day at the ARP headquarters, Mum had been right. It *wasn't* like Lydia to mock Teddy. She was the eldest, nearly twelve years old, and was meant to be the sensible one. The one who comforted, reassured, was always responsible.

The gas mask *had* looked scary. It turned quite ordinary people into monsters, with googly eyes and long snouts, and sent shudders down her *own* spine, making her want to scream too.

The government had suggested everyone should wear their masks for fifteen minutes a day to get used to them.

Not likely.

The whole spring and summer had felt unreal. Around the same time as the gas-mask fittings, every single household received a copy of *Protecting Your Home Against Air Raids*. Reading it had given Lydia a strange,

doomy sort of feeling. The sense that something terrible was about to happen that she was powerless to stop.

Then the actual *look* of London began to change: sandbags appearing all over the place, whole walls of them propped up against important buildings; things called barrage balloons, to deter Germans, filling the sky like huge, bloated fish; and headlines blaring sinister stuff like 'War Is Coming' splashed across news stands.

Several times the whole family had got up at the crack of dawn and gone to school, even though it was the summer holidays, to practise a thing called Operation Pied Piper, which Peg seemed to think was fun and an adventure, even when Lydia tried to explain that the Pied Piper was a bad person.

'No, he wasn't – he got rid of all the rats!' said Peg.

'But then he disappeared all the children!' said Lydia. Did Peggy not understand? This was *serious*.

'Only because the mayor didn't pay him,' piped up Teddy, who at six was already known as the 'clever one' and remembered every part of every story that had ever been read to her.

The reason Mum didn't like Lydia poring over the leaflets was because she worried too much – a worrywart, Dad used to call her – and Mum said they had enough on their plates already without Lydia's extra worries on top. But how on earth could she *not* worry? What would

happen if there *was* a war? Would she and Teddy and Peg be sent away – evacuated, they called it – with all the other London children? Because that was what Operation Pied Piper was all about. She'd had to hide the *National Service Handbook* under her pillow so she could read it from cover to cover, every single frightening thing about evacuating children from 'crowded cities to districts of greater safety'.

But where would that be? It was bound to involve the countryside and Mrs Jessop always said the countryside was a horrid, backward place with no towns and no hustle and bustle. No streets teeming with people, or chip shops and picture houses, and no Lyons Tea Shops either.

'Just the thought of it makes me shiver,' Mrs Jessop had said with a dramatic shudder.

It gave Lydia a cold feeling too, not because of the lack of shops, but because it would mean being separated from Mum.

She resolved that if an evacuation did happen, she wouldn't go. She'd lie down in the middle of the road and stop the traffic, or tie herself to the railings like a suffragette, and no one, not even someone with the most enormous powers of strength, would be able to move her.

But then . . . what if her efforts failed and they *were* forced to go, her and Peg and Teddy, and what if, while they were away, Mum was killed? By a bomb? They'd

be proper orphans then, not just half ones as they were now, and . . .

All summer long, Lydia's thoughts boiled and churned. Then right at the end of August things took a turn for the better. They'd gone on holiday with the last bit of money from the sale of one of Dad's paintings. It was a favourite of Lydia's, the one of the backs of the houses that reminded her of the tantalising glimpses you sometimes got of backyards when you were trundling past on the train.

An elderly gentleman with a white beard and a beret had bought it. His name was Mr Charles W. Wittenstone RA. The W stood for Walter (of course Teddy had asked – 'Far too inquisitive for your own good,' Mrs Jessop always said) and the RA stood for Royal Academy, which meant he was an artist himself. He'd stroked his elegant beard and declared *Hornsey Backs* 'a truly fine painting – your late husband was a talented man, Mrs Linden,' which they all knew to be true, of course, and agreed that if Charles W. Wittenstone recognised this important fact then the painting had gone to a good home.

Lydia was sad to see *Hornsey Backs* go, but it *had* bought them the holiday, which was lovely. They'd taken the train to Broadstairs and stayed in a boarding house where they'd had fry-ups for breakfast, picnics for lunch, and fish and chips for tea. Every day they'd gone to the beach, which was shaped like a horseshoe, and swum in the sea and made

huge and complicated sandcastles. Teddy had cried floods when the tide swept them away, until Mum had reminded her that the moon governed the tides and that, 'Without tides there'd be no crabs and mussels and starfish, darling.'

'And no flotsam and jetsam,' contributed Peggy, who was the arty one and the best at collecting the most prized shells and sea glass. She'd dug in her pocket then and fished out a handful of treasures, letting Teddy choose the brightest, shiniest piece, and everything had been all right again.

They'd had ice cream at Morelli's and walked along the clifftop to Ramsgate one way, and to Margate the other. Mum had picked masses of stiff wild sea grass and woven a sort of sculpture that curved and rippled and made you think of the sea and sky and all the beautiful flowers that sprouted out of the cliff face wherever you looked. Time seemed to be suspended. It had been wonderful – glorious – and just for a while Lydia felt normal.

She very nearly forgot about the war. Even the dreadful crater left behind by Dad seemed less yawningly black and huge.

Until they tried to return to London.