

CHAPTER ONE

‘Stand by yer beds!’ Evan Williams shouted. ‘Lights out in *seven* minutes.’

He was a small Welshman with one big eyebrow. Twenty-four boys lived in his dorm. They hurried barefoot over the cold lino, putting toothbrushes in foot lockers and draping towels over radiators before standing at the end of their metal-framed beds ready for inspection.

Each bed was immaculately made. Belongings had to be packed neatly inside a foot locker, with boots or plimsolls cleaned and resting on top in a ten-past-ten position.

‘Attention!’

Each boy snapped into a rigid position. Ankles together, eyes forward, shoulders back. Williams would have liked the boys to wear matching pyjamas, but

clothing was short and newer arrivals wore whatever they'd brought with them.

'Not bad,' Williams said grudgingly as he passed the first pair of facing beds. At the next he reached under the mattress and dug two fingers between the rusted bed frame and mattress.

'In the name of our *lord!*' Williams gasped. His giant eyebrow fired upwards as he jabbed a rusty finger under the nose of a thirteen-year-old with curly brown hair and deep-set eyes.

Troy LeConte knew he was being fitted up: the beds were old and you could reach under any of them if you wanted rust stuck on your finger. It was Williams' way of showing that he could get you, even if you stuck to all of his petty rules.

'Well, LeConte?' Williams demanded. 'Cat got your tongue? What is this?'

Troy didn't know the English word for rust, but reckoned a quick answer beat none at all. 'It's your finger, sir,' he said, with a heavy French accent.

This raised cautious laughter from the other boys and Williams looked irritated.

'I know it's my finger, you stupid frog,' he roared. 'I'm asking you what's *on* my finger.'

Troy went cross-eyed as Williams dabbed his chunky finger against the bridge of his nose.

'I don't know the word,' Troy explained.

'You little retard!' Williams shouted, as he grabbed the neck hole of Troy's string vest, yanked the lad forwards and cuffed him around the head. 'Cold shower, five a.m.,' he barked, before letting go and moving up to the next bed.

Troy rubbed his head before standing crisply back to attention. He hated Williams, but had seen plenty of lads come off worse during inspection. He turned his head as far as he dared, watching the relief on each boy's face when Williams passed them by.

'Mason LeConte,' Williams said, when he was almost at the opposite end of the room. 'Well, well, it seems stupidity runs in the family.'

Troy's brother Mason was only eight, but that didn't stop Williams from twisting his ear and yanking it up until he dangled on tiptoes.

'The blankets are crooked, you *stupid* boy,' Williams shouted, as Mason gave a howl that turned his older brother's stomach.

Troy felt guilty as Williams ripped off his little brother's sheets and blanket. Mason was the youngest in the dorm and Troy usually helped him before inspection, but he'd been sent upstairs to fetch candles by the night matron and had barely had time to make his own bed.

‘I’ve never seen such a shambles,’ Williams roared, as he took the metal lid from Mason’s foot locker and threw its contents across the floor. ‘Are you feeble-minded, boy?’

‘No, sir,’ the boy sobbed, as Williams upended Mason’s metal locker, then shook him violently by the shoulders.

‘This shoe-cleaning kit is filthy. *Nothing* is folded properly. Why is there mud on the sole of your plimsoll?’

After each sentence Williams jammed two fingers under Mason’s ribs, sending his body into a spasm.

‘Report to my office first thing,’ Williams yelled. ‘And cold showers for a week.’

‘No!’ Mason wailed, as he tried to wriggle away. ‘Leave me alone.’

Troy knew he’d come off badly if he interfered, but what kind of person stood and watched their little brother get bullied?

‘Unacceptable!’ Troy shouted, using the only appropriate English word he could think of as he stepped away from his bed and strode purposefully down the narrow room towards Williams. A couple of boys whispered cautions, and one even stepped into his path.

‘He’ll murder you,’ the boy warned.

‘Keep your head down, mate,’ another begged, but Troy marched on.

Troy imagined an heroic gesture: knocking Williams out with a punch to the jaw or slicing his head off with

a sword. But reality found a thirteen-year-old dressed in baggy shorts and vest facing a grown man with fiery eyes and hobnail boots.

‘It seems I have a visitor,’ Williams said, cracking a demented smile as he shoved Mason back over the end of his bed. ‘What can we do for you?’

Troy was quaking, but couldn’t walk meekly back to his bed with all the other lads looking on.

‘He’s eight years old,’ Troy said. ‘Why not help, instead of hurting him?’

‘Or you’ll do what, big man?’ Williams taunted. ‘This is my dormitory. I make the rules.’

Troy had fought a few times in his thirteen years. He’d won more than he’d lost, but the punch he threw now wasn’t his best. It glanced off the fleshy part of Williams’ arm with barely enough force to rustle his shirt.

‘You dare raise a hand to me!’ Williams roared, as Troy found himself being thrown forwards over the end of Mason’s bed, with Williams wrenching his arm tight behind his back and his brother’s legs trapped beneath him. ‘George, Tom, deal with him.’

George and Tom were stocky lads of fifteen. They acted as snitches and enforcers for Williams, who let them bully and extort the younger lads in return.

‘Put them both down,’ Williams ordered, before

pointing at Troy. 'And make *his* trip an uncomfortable one.'

Troy didn't know what being *put down* meant, but there were sadistic grins on George and Tom's faces as they grabbed his arms and bundled him outside. After dragging Troy ten metres down a freezing corridor, they turned into an unlit cloakroom and shoved him in a corner with a coat hook digging into his back.

'Fists up, you French weed,' George grinned, as he made a boxing stance. The fifteen-year-old was bigger than his pyjamas and his muscular torso showed where his top was too small to button over his chest.

Troy raised his hands, but George was too strong. His first punch batted Troy's defences aside. The second was an uppercut that smacked his lower jaw and made his teeth clatter.

'I've got plenty more where that came from,' George laughed, as he grabbed Troy around the neck, bent him over and brought his knee up into his guts.

Troy groaned and belched as his throat filled with burning stomach acid. George backed away after a couple more punches, only for Tom to drag Troy out of the corner and hook his ankle, sending him sprawling across the floor.

'Stings, don't it, froggy?' Tom smiled.

Troy groaned as he rolled on to his back, then sat up,

clutching his stomach and coughing.

‘We can do what we like to you now,’ George added. ‘Fancy raising your hands to Williams! You just signed your own death warrant.’

Troy was defenceless, lying in the dark with two heavyweights looming. He hurt in a dozen places and blood drizzled from his nose. Out in the corridor he heard wailing and saw Mason’s legs as Williams dragged him past the doorway.

George hitched Troy off the gritty lino, intending to knock him down again, but Williams called from the far end of the corridor.

‘Get Troy out here. I want to be in my room before *Book at Bedtime* comes on.’

A metal bolt thumped. With one hand grasping Mason’s neck, Williams booted a door open and bitter outdoor air rushed into the corridor. Troy finally understood what being *put down* meant as he was dragged barefoot on to the icy courtyard behind the building.

‘I’m not going down there,’ Mason sobbed as Williams lifted the hinged wooden flap that covered the entrance to the coal cellar. ‘*Please* don’t make me.’

‘It’s the only way you’ll learn,’ Williams shouted. ‘Now, sit on the edge and jump or I’ll throw you down.’

The coal was piled high at one corner of the cellar.

Mason made the short drop on to the highest part of the mound and scrambled down over churning coal to an area of bare floor in the far corner.

‘Watch out for the rats,’ Tom teased. ‘They’ll gnaw your toes if you fall asleep.’

George was ready to shove Troy down into the cellar. ‘Hold up,’ Williams ordered. ‘Let’s have a look at him.’

Tom clamped a muscular arm around Troy’s waist. Williams moved up close and smiled, as Mason’s sobbing echoed out of the cellar below them.

‘I never did like Frenchies,’ Williams said, before slapping Troy hard across his right eye. ‘Throw him down.’

Troy’s head swirled from the blow as Tom let him go. George kicked Troy behind the knees, buckling his legs and sending him face first into the mound of coal. The wooden cellar door banged shut over his head, and Williams fixed a joist over the flaps to lock it.

‘Sleep tight, boys,’ Williams said nastily.

‘But don’t forget the rats,’ George added.

Mason stood with his back against an unplastered wall. It was pitch dark, his feet were in icy water and he shuddered, imagining bugs and spiders crawling all around him.

‘Troy?’ he said quietly, before erupting into a coughing fit as coal dust tickled the back of his throat.

Mason waited for the voices above to disappear before

feeling his way back up the mound of freezing coal lumps. He sniffled as he rested a hand on Troy's back, between his shoulder blades.

'Troy?' he said, tapping his hand warily. 'What's the matter, Troy? Are you dead?'

CHAPTER TWO

Air hissed and Marc Kilgour jolted as the hydraulically powered chair reclined, leaving a bright anglepoise lamp shining into his eyes. His fingertips dug anxiously into the leather armrests and his eyes watered as he studied the white ceiling and glass-fronted cupboards filled with sets of false teeth and scary dental implements.

Dr Helen Murray of Harley Street, London, specialised in child patients and serious dental injuries. She swung the light away from Marc and looked down on the twelve-year-old's blue eyes and crudely cropped blond hair.

'Nervous?' she asked warmly, trying to put him at ease.

'A bit,' Marc admitted.

'When did you last visit a dentist?'

Marc spoke with a French accent, but he had a gift for languages and you'd never have guessed that he'd been learning English for barely four months. 'I lived at an orphanage in France,' he explained. 'The director would wind wire around your teeth and rip them out if you got toothache.'

'We're *slightly* more sophisticated here,' Dr Murray told him. 'I've got all the latest equipment from the United States. Now, show me those pearly whites.'

Marc opened wide, displaying a reasonable set of teeth with a missing front incisor.

'I've seen much worse,' Dr Murray said, as she took a highly polished sickle probe from her instrument tray. 'But there's a lot of decay at the back. You need to get in there with your brush and clean all the way to the back, otherwise you'll end up with a mouthful of false teeth before you're twenty.'

Marc shuddered with fear as the probe passed between his lips and gently touched his gum.

'Curl your tongue back . . . That's right. Now, does it feel numb when I press against it?'

'Uh-huh,' Marc agreed, as his mind flashed back to the Gestapo officer who'd ripped his tooth out the previous summer.

'Do you remember the piece of root on the X-ray I showed you?' Dr Murray asked, as she picked up an

angled mirror with her other hand. 'When that front tooth came out it was pulled so violently that the root snapped away near the base. The fragment has lodged in your gum and prevented the wound from healing properly. That's why you've been getting discomfort.

'Now I'm going to cut into the gum and take that fragment out. Unfortunately I've got to dig quite deep, but I'll try to work as quickly as possible.'

Dr Murray's assistant mopped sweat off Marc's brow. The boy's arms clenched as the dentist swung the lamp back towards his face.

'Nice and wide then,' she smiled. 'I'm afraid this bit is going to be quite uncomfortable.'

Marc's eyes streamed from the bright light but he managed to open them a fraction. His heart skipped as he saw the sharp edge of a scalpel blade hovering over tip of his nose.

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Two miles away Charles Henderson sat in the more comfortable surroundings of the Empire and India club dining room in Pall Mall. The place had seen better days. The wood-panelled walls bore ancient paintings of maharajahs, while the stuffed bear by the door had a sad face and had lost most of its fur.

Both Henderson and his dining partner wore

uniform. Henderson had the gold-cuffed blazer of a naval commander. His companion wore more utilitarian RAF garb, but bore the much superior rank of an Air Vice Marshal. Between them lay bowls of watery curry and a single mound of saffron rice.

‘Bloody awful.’ Henderson sucked a mouthful of lukewarm potato and stringy lamb from his spoon.

Air Vice Marshal Walker nodded. ‘The food at boarding school was better than this. What was your school by the way, Henderson?’

‘Burghley Road Grammar,’ Henderson admitted.

Walker raised one eyebrow. It was uncommon for someone from a working-class background to become a naval officer and rarer still for him to be accepted into a gentlemen’s club like the Empire and India.

Henderson felt the need to explain. ‘Married above my station,’ he said jovially. ‘My father-in-law put me up for club membership.’

‘Of course,’ Walker smiled, as he let his spoon do the nodding. ‘How is your wife? Joan, isn’t it?’

Henderson shifted awkwardly. ‘Eccentric,’ he explained. ‘We lost a daughter to tuberculosis and she’s never been herself since.’

‘Are you still living in Mayfair?’

Henderson shook his head. ‘The bombing played havoc with Joan’s nerves. We’ve let the place to a

Jewish couple from Frankfurt and we're living up at the training campus.'

'Yes,' Walker said, as he eyed something in his curry suspiciously. 'These boys of yours, how has that been going?'

Henderson cracked a broad smile. 'They're great. I found a Japanese drill instructor in an internment camp, and he's licking the boys into shape. We've got six trainees in the first batch and they're shaping up wonderfully. Superintendent McAfferty is on the road recruiting more boys, to form our second unit.'

'Does that look like a mouse dropping to you, Henderson?' Walker asked, as he pulled a small brown pellet from his bowl.

'I wouldn't know, sir,' said Henderson, as he tried not to smile. 'If you're going to eat the food here it's best not to put too much thought into it. And to be fair, it hasn't killed me yet.'

'It's spices, innit!' a flabby waitress said as she loomed over the table and scowled at the wall clock. 'What do you expect if you order this funny foreign muck? Now, if you want a sweet you'd better hurry up 'cos I'm off home before blackout and all the tables gotta be cleared ready for dinner.'

Walker flicked the brown pellet back into his curry and pushed the bowl away. 'Perhaps you could send the sweet trolley over?'

The waitress grunted. 'There's spotted dick or fruit crumble. We haven't had a sweet trolley since four months back.'

'What kind of fruit?' Henderson asked, and immediately regretted it.

'The kind that comes in a big tin marked *fruit*.'

Walker held his stomach. 'Do you know, I suddenly feel rather full? I'll just have some coffee.'

The waitress pointed towards a table at the back of the room. 'In the pot, self service.'

Henderson and Walker both laughed as the waitress waddled away with their plates.

'The staff here are *appalling*,' Walker said grinning. 'Whatever happened to our white-gloved waiters and silver service?'

'Off fighting the Boche,' Henderson smiled. 'Speaking of which, I was rather hoping that you could help me cut through some red tape. My boys will need parachute training if they're going to infiltrate occupied France, but the RAF parachute training school is throwing up all kinds of barriers.'

Walker paused to take this in. 'Listen, Henderson,' he said firmly. 'Frankly, myself and several others at the Special Operations Executive feel that this whole scheme of yours to train up boys for undercover work is rather far-fetched.'

‘You have more experience of working undercover in France than anyone else. We feel you should be at headquarters in Baker Street coordinating operations. I’d like you to become my second-in-command. That’s a two-rank promotion and you’d be running all undercover operations in the occupied portion of France.’

Henderson was dealing with a senior officer and had to reply tactfully. ‘Sir, if those are my orders I’ll report to headquarters and do the best job I can. But with the greatest respect, I’m a field agent not an administrator. Meetings bore me and bureaucracy tends to rub me up the wrong way.’

‘I’d hoped you wouldn’t say that,’ Walker said stiffly. ‘But rather suspected you would.’

‘Square peg in the proverbial round hole, I’m afraid, sir.’

‘You’re really convinced that training up boys to work undercover is going to give us an edge?’

‘Absolutely no doubt in my mind, sir,’ Henderson said firmly. ‘Do you think you’ll be able to put in a word about the parachute training?’

Walker pushed his chair back from the table slightly and sighed. ‘You’re a good man, Henderson, but I’m not the only one with doubts about your scheme. The intelligence services have very limited resources and I’m not at all convinced that we should expend them on

parachute training for twelve-year-olds who are emotionally unsuited for undercover operations.'

Henderson was dismayed by this sudden turn of events. He felt short of air and tugged at his collar. 'Sir,' he said anxiously, 'the operation I led against the invasion barges was a huge success. The children I used behaved superbly and their youth was an advantage because the Nazis didn't suspect them. We had a letter from the minister indicating that the Prime Minister himself approved . . .'

Now Walker sounded irritated. 'Commander, I'm *well* aware of the circumstances surrounding the formation of your unit. However, many people have the ear of the Prime Minister and his decisions are not irrevocable. Is that clear?'

'Yes, sir,' Henderson nodded, struggling to contain his anger.

'At present, I'm not prepared to authorise parachute training or any other additional resources for Espionage Research Unit B and I further warn you that the entire future of your unit is under review.'

'Sir, could I ask that my unit at least be given a *chance* to prove itself? I know resources are scarce, but we're close to having an operational espionage unit that could give the Boche a bloody nose. At least let me speak to the people conducting this review.'

Walker stood up and threw down the napkin that had been on his lap. 'Your little unit is a ridiculous distraction,' he said. 'If you are to play any part in the review process, you'll be informed in due course. Now I have to get back to Baker Street.'

'Yes, sir,' Henderson said.

As Air Vice Marshal Walker headed across the thick carpet and out towards the cloakroom, Henderson loosened his collar, rubbed his reddened brow and wondered how to save his unit.