**Prologue**

*Prague*

*Saturday 10th June 1939 19:30 hours*

‘Go now, Eliska, show off your talents to the world! We’ll all be watching…’

The six-year-old Jewish violinist stepped hesitantly out onto the theatre stage, her blonde, bobbed hair shining like gold under the bright lights. The orchestra rose to their feet and clapped, string players tapping bows on chairs in appreciation of what was to come. They had been rehearsing for weeks, and so knew that they were part of something special. It was an occasion to savour, one to tell their grandchildren about… *we were there.*

‘May I introduce Eliska Rosenfeld,’ the conductor announced, extending his arm. ‘A favourite pupil of our very own Bohuslav Martinů!’ Rapturous applause spilled out into the theatre. ‘And of course, Eliska’s priceless Stradivarius violin,’ the conductor added. ‘Loaned by our very own patron, Frau Goldmann.’

The audience hugged their seats, eagerly in anticipation of something rare and precious. ‘Look at the crowds! I hear they’re calling her Little Miss Mozart,’ Jakob Rosenfeld said to his wife, sitting high in an elegant box. Glancing at his daughter, he dropped into his plush, velvet armchair between Eliska’s older brother and sister. Tears of happiness glistened in Maria’s eyes. ‘I’m so proud of her, Jakob.

‘Yes, Maria. This is a great day for our family.’ Smiling, Jakob gazed at his daughter, his own happy tears welling up. Then he looked down. ‘I knew they’d come,’ he sighed under his breath. ‘Why can’t they just leave us alone?’

Two Gestapo\* officers wearing long, leather coats and brown trilbies marched to the front of the stage. Ushering a fearful couple from their front row seats, the officers sat down.

The conductor readied the musicians and raised his baton. The opening bars of Bruch’s violin concerto filled the auditorium. The woodwind section played slow, melodious chords. Seconds later, Eliska joined in. Notes of beauty drifted out of her Stradivarius.

Closing their eyes, Eliska’s Mama and Papa fell into rapturous dreams, two spirits bathed in happiness. Her siblings watched their sister perform, pride running through their veins. All too soon, the concert was over, Eliska’s final notes fading away. Loud applause reverberated around the theatre. Applause that seemed to last forever…

Eliska’s father pushed through admirers, eager to congratulate his daughter and rescue her from the crowds. He slid through the stage door and found Eliska surrounded by her fellow musicians. ‘I knew you’d do it,’ he cried, ‘I knew it and I’m so, so proud of you!’ Gently, he embraced Eliska, tears rolling down his face. ‘I don’t think I’ve ever been happier!’

Then a deep, German voice cut into his thoughts. ‘Ah, so this is young Eliska,’ one of the Gestapo officers said, peering through tortoiseshell spectacles. ‘The one they’re calling “Little Miss Mozart”, I do believe. I’m very pleased to meet you, young lady.’

Shaking the man’s hand, Eliska curtseyed. ‘Are you the child’s father?’ the other officer asked, his short but thick blonde hair slicked back. He stared at Jakob, his hands still hiding in his greatcoat. Nervously, Jakob answered. ‘Yes, I am, why do you ask?’

‘The rumours are certainly true - your daughter plays like an angel. I’m sure our beloved Führer would love to hear young Eliska play one day.’

‘Perhaps she can come soon and meet General Wolff at Prague castle?’ the spectacled officer added. ‘The general’s one of Hitler’s close friends, you see.’

‘Err, yes, I’m sure we can arrange something soon,’ Jakob replied, avoiding the officers’ tiny eyes. Quickly, he picked up his daughter’s red coat, her music and her violin case and ushered her away. An outstretched arm barred his path. ‘There’s only one problem,’ the blonde officer calmly announced.

‘What’s that?’ Jakob’s palms grew sticky as he clutched his daughter’s hand.

‘Your surname – I do believe it’s Rosenfeld, isn’t it?’

‘Yes, why do you ask?’

‘Unfortunately for you, that’s not German, it’s not Czech either, it’s *Jewish*.’

Maria Rosenfeld appeared, Eliska’s older brother and sister trailing behind.

‘Well, I’m sure we can arrange a concert soon, gentlemen,’ Jakob said, pulling Eliska away. ‘Good evening to you both.’

As the Gestapo officers nodded, the Rosenfeld family hurried away, young and old hearts beating furiously. They marched through the auditorium and headed out onto the street.

‘What’s going on, Maria?’ Jakob asked, dashing through crowds, his family in tow. ‘Everything we know and love is disappearing…’

 The Jewish synagogue was burning, huge, angry flames reaching for the sky. People were screaming, chased by German soldiers. Hungry German shepherd dogs barked, straining on their long, leather leads. Crowds scattered in all directions. Stormtroopers pushed into people, gripping rifles and machine guns, They trampled on the old and infirm, anybody too slow. Gunfire echoed, punching smoke-filled clouds.

Someone launched a brick at a Jewish shop window, the Star of David already painted on its glass in thick, white paint. The huge pane shattered. Jagged glass shards leapt out of the window, dancing on the street. People crowded around the broken shop front. They grabbed shoes and boots, looting anything they could get their hands on.

Quickly, Eliska and her family rushed down a narrow alleyway and disappeared.

*\* The official secret police of Nazi Germany*

**Chapter 1**

*Bletchley Park, Bletchley, Buckinghamshire*

*Monday 5th January 1942 0800 hours*

The sleek, silver saloon rolled up, its heavy wheels grating gravel. ‘I love you, dad,’ Harry whispered in the back seat. He stared at the telegram’s cold, cruel words and then tucked it back into his pocket.

*Dear Mrs. Smith - Deeply regret to inform you that your husband, Sergeant Sidney Smith has been reported missing. Letter to follow. Squadron Leader C.R. Godfrey.*

The message, now almost three months old, still floated in Harry’s head like a dark storm cloud. Gingerly clambering out of the car, he glanced up. A huge Victorian mansion stood before him, its arched entrance like a medieval castle’s. Nosy faces filled the windows, staring down at all the new arrivals. *I wonder what they’re all thinking?* Harry thought, gazing at the strangers’ faces.

‘Welcome to Blackfriars.’

Harry spun around and saw a tall army officer clutching a clipboard. ‘Thank you, sir.’ He dropped his suitcase onto the dull stones with an equally dull thud. ‘Do I need to salute you, sir?’

‘Won’t be necessary. Colonel Topping at your service.’ The elderly officer’s silver, wavy moustache danced as he spoke. ‘I hope you have a very pleasant stay with us! Now, young man, did you remember to bring your invitation?’

Harry fished out his Blackfriars invitation; *Most Secret* stamped on its envelope, and held it out. Colonel Topping took it, removed the cream-colored card inside and gave it a cursory glance.

‘Name?’

‘Smith, sir, Harry Smith.’

‘Age?’

‘Fourteen, sir.’

Colonel Topping returned the invitation, ticked off Harry’s name, and handed him a map of the Blackfriar’s site. He glanced at his watch. ‘Right. First things first. Leave your suitcase with Corporal Withers.’ He pointed to a young soldier standing at ease nearby. ‘Then proceed to Hut 12, room 7. Captain Chivers is expecting you. No need to knock.’

His flimsy map bending in the breeze, Harry took in the myriad buildings and felt instantly lost. ‘Where’s Hut 12, sir?’

‘Initiative, young man,’ Colonel Topping quipped, tapping his head.

Corporal Withers grinned as Harry handed him his small suitcase, and whispered, ‘Head between those huts over there and turn left. Hut 12 is the fifth on the right, between 11 and 14. Best get a move on. Unwise to keep Captain Chivers waiting.’

‘Thanks.’

As Harry headed off he noticed a queue of cars forming along the winding gravel driveway. More recruits. A tall girl with long dark hair emerged from an Alvis motor car. Colonel Topping waved to her, as if he knew her already. How many of them were there? It struck Harry that Blackfriars, whatever its purpose, was a major enterprise, almost as big as his school back home. He remembered to turn left. Withers’ directions proved right. Hut 12 was exactly where he’d said. Between numbers 11 and 14. Harry paused and looked about. Strange. No number 13. Then he remembered what his dad used to say, *“Thirteen, unlucky number that.”*

Like the others, hut 12 was wooden and about fifty feet long, its square windows comprising small panes of glass criss-crossed with tape to prevent splintering should a bomb explode nearby. Slightly out of breath, Harry pushed open the door and was confronted by a narrow corridor and a stuffy mix of stale tobacco smoke and floor polish. Pieces of paper were pinned to a noticeboard and he paused to glance at them.

One announced the winners of various sporting activities; another was a weekly canteen menu offering up a diet mainly comprising carrots and things made with powdered egg. Harry frowned. The next notice was strange. It was a reminder to recruits that mislaying their pencil cases, or misusing their contents, was a serious offence. Harry’s lips moved as he silently read out the consequences – *Recruits may be either, 1. Instantly dismissed from Blackfriars, 2. Subject to criminal prosecution leading to a fine of up to £100 and up to 6 months imprisonment at His Majesty’s pleasure.*

For losing your pencil case? Harry swallowed hard. *What the hell is this place?* A distant sneeze snapped him from his thoughts and he remembered he was supposed to meet a Captain Chivers, room 7. Locating a door with a Bakelite\* ‘7’ sign stuck to it, the door’s brass handle was small and loose and rattled as he twisted it. Harry entered the room.

An army officer was sitting behind a desk, a single wooden chair parked in front of it. A brown, peaked cap was balanced on his head, two lines of colourful medal ribbons stuck to his uniform. He didn’t look up.

‘Sit down, please, Smith,’ he said, his accent a slow, American drawl. Harry obeyed the officer’s raspy order. ‘Captain Chuck Chivers, U.S. Army. Welcome to Blackfriars. Any reason you’re a minute late?’

‘Sorry sir, I got lost.’ He really wanted to ask what was so special about the pencil cases, but something inside him made him hesitate.

Chivers looked up and sat back in his chair. ‘Get lost in your bedroom during blackout, do you?’ He threw down his pen and folded his arms. ‘You’re a failure, aren’t you, Smith?’

‘Excuse me, sir?’

Chivers sighed, leaned forward and spun a piece of paper across the table. ‘Says there you played rugby for Norley RUFC *but* proved about as useful as a chocolate teapot!’

Harry felt the urge to burst out laughing but saw that Captain Chivers’s pitted face remained hard and stern.

‘Couldn't tackle a Sunday roast! That’s what my report says.’

Feeling at a loss, Harry shrugged. ‘I tried, sir.’

‘Filling your underpants every game? Is that what you mean?’

‘No, sir,’ Harry said, sliding a smirk back into his mouth before it filled his face.

‘And stamp collecting, what’s that all about?’ Chivers shook his head. ‘You’ll be telling me you enjoy knitting with your grandmother next!’

Deciding Chivers wasn’t really being serious, and attempting to make him feel at ease with a little humour, Harry smiled, rolling his eyes.

‘Wipe that silly smile off your face, Smith.’ Chivers tapped his pencil on his desk, his eyes burning into his young recruit. ‘Blackfriars isn't interested in weaklings or chickens. I bet you get blisters playing Snakes and Ladders! Do you do anything *interesting*? Anything *useful*?’

Sitting stiffly upright in his chair, Harry thought quickly. ‘Well, I’m one of the fastest sprinters in my school, sir. And I go fishing, make models, and I’m even learning to fly a Tiger Moth!’ Harry felt his toes curling up. They always did that when he felt embarrassed or under attack. And he reached into his pocket for his most precious possession.

‘I said anything *interesting!*’ Chivers snapped. ‘My brother’s poodle can fly a Tiger Moth! Anything else you’re *supposedly* good at?’

 ‘I speak Czech, sir, because my mum’s from there and I drive trucks and tractors and ride motorcycles. I help out at Lord Harrington’s farm, see, and - ’

‘That’s enough, Smith. Swallowed a dictionary? If you’re such an expert, what’s the capital of Czechoslovakia?’

‘Prague, sir.’

The captain nodded, his pencil gliding across his papers. ‘Speak Czech, eh? Blackfriars could use somebody like you. If, that is, you can speak it like a native. Without an English accent. Say a few sentences for me. I speak the lingo myself, usually after a few beers!’

Harry did so and for the first time Chivers seemed impressed. ‘But why do I need to speak Czech, Sir?’ Harry asked, smiling. ‘I live in England!’

‘Look Smith, the world is at war,’ Chivers said, still scribbling notes. ‘Obviously, you’ll know that, unless you’ve been living under a rock for the past few years. Not a secret woodlouse are you?’ Finally, he looked up at Harry and folded his arms.

‘Germany’s Adolf Hitler’s risen to power and that evil, twisted tyrant and his Nazi followers are intent on taking over the whole world. Nobody can stop them at the moment! They’ve almost occupied the whole of Europe. Thank God for the “Battle of Britain” and those brave boys at R.A.F. fighter command, otherwise, they’d be here, little fella, right on your doorstep, forcing us all to eat Bratwurst sausages and drink German beer. So somebody needs to stop them and fast!’

‘So speaking Czech will help me, Captain Chivers?’

‘Speaking any foreign language, Smith. It’s a great skill.’

‘Oh, I see, thank you, Sir.’

‘What’s that you’ve got in your pocket? Show me.’ Chivers held out a hand.

Harry took out and stared at the photograph. He rubbed his thumb against its smooth, glossy surface. ‘My dad, sir,’ he croaked. He held up the picture.

‘Hey, Royal Air Force! You must be proud, Smith. Where’s your papa based?’

The ticking clock on Chivers’ desk cut into a sudden silence. Harry peered into his photograph, and it brought back memories…

*‘This is the life, son,’ Harry heard his dad say. They were sitting together on a riverbank. The warm, summer sun burst through thin, scattered cloud. Each had a fishing rod, the lines disappearing into the river. ‘A penny if you catch a trout, Harry, tuppence if it’s a salmon!’ Harry felt his brown hair being ruffled.*

‘Are you listening, Smith?’ Chivers tapped his pencil hard on his desk again. ‘I said, where’s your papa based?’

‘He’s missing, sir.’ Harry curled his toes again. He looked up, and the memory of their last fishing trip faded. ‘Missing in action - after a night bombing raid over Berlin. Got a telegram from his Squadron Leader a few months ago. Mum’s still distraught. No further news as yet.’

Chivers seemed taken aback and rifled through the file on his desk. Harry realised he’d expected to have been informed of crucial facts like that, and because he hadn’t, was momentarily caught off guard.

‘I see, well, erm, I’m truly sorry to hear that.’ Chivers cursed under his breath. ‘Listen, if I’d known, I wouldn’t have, well, you know, begun so hard on you just now. You must be upset. I’m sorry.’

‘That’s OK, sir.’

Chivers relaxed into his chair. ‘Bomber command, eh? The bravest of the brave fly bombers in my opinion, little fella. You must be proud! But, listen, your papa just might have baled out. So, cling to that hope.’ He pulled out a handkerchief and tossed it across his desk. ‘And chin up, as you English say.’

Harry wiped his eyes. ‘I hope so, sir. I think about him every day.’

‘Of course.’ Captain Chivers picked up a small brass frame standing on his desk. ‘Here’s my papa.’ He passed the photograph to Harry. A cavalry officer stared out. He was mounted on a huge stallion, the horse’s coat like a polished chestnut.

‘He was killed, Smith,’ Chivers said grimly. ‘In the Great War, battle of Cambrai. That photograph was taken just before he sailed to England in 1917.’

‘You look like him, sir.’

‘Yeah! Suppose I do. I was only twelve years old at the time, so I kinda know how you’re feeling. I suppose he’s the reason why I joined the army years back. Make him proud of me and all that. And guess what? I think about him every day too - just like you, little fella!’

‘Thank you, sir.’

‘Anyway, loosen up, Smith. A stint at Blackfriars is probably just what you need right now. Will do you good.’ Chivers pen danced across his papers again. ‘*If* you pass selection and are chosen for training, I’ll see you again. If not, *Au revoir* as the French say. And it goes without saying, I hope your dad did bale out and he’s alive somewhere. But remember what I’ve said. Cling onto that four letter word - *hope.* That’s all you’ve got. That’s all anybody’s got in this goddam war!’

‘Thank you very much, sir.’

‘Any questions?’

Harry’s mind went blank, but then he remembered. ‘I saw that sign on the noticeboard outside, sir, about the pencil cases, and I was just wondering...’

‘Ah! Yes, well, you’ll find out soon enough. If you pass selection. Oh, just need you to sign this form, Smith.’ Captain Chivers passed Harry a six-page form full of tiny writing and a black fountain pen.

‘What is it, sir?’

‘The Official Secrets Act.’

 ‘What’s it for, sir?’

‘Well, let me put it this way. What happens in Blackfriars stays in Blackfriars.’ Tapping his nose, Chivers winked. ‘Sign this form and adventure awaits. Refuse and you’re on your way home. Read the small print…if you have a few hours to spare!’

Harry scribbled his signature.

‘Any further questions?’

Thoughts rolled around Harry’s head. ‘What’s Blackfriars all about, sir?’

Captain Chivers glanced up and narrowed his eyes. ‘Right now, if I told you that, I’m afraid I’d have to kill you!’

*\* An ‘early’ form of brittle plastic*

**Chapter 2**

Bumping into Corporal Withers, Harry learnt that Blackfriars was located in the grounds of Bletchley Park, a large, sprawling country house in Bletchley, Buckinghamshire. People worked for the war ministry, around the clock in sparse, secret offices; hidden away in a warren of long, grey huts. They darted about like an army of industrious ants, cracking secret German ENIGMA codes.

*This is exciting,* Harry thought, watching young WRENs\* dashing about, their pencil-thin legs slicing the air. Huge files of papers stuck out from under arms, cigarettes often trapped between fingers. Beginning to realise that this place was a crucial part of the war effort, and a Most Secret one too, he couldn’t believe he’d been recommended as a recruit. He wondered what secrets lay in those files. What really happens here?

Bletchley Park was a huge, stately home full of windows. It resembled four houses stuck together, four different architects having their say. Several tall brick chimneys sprouted from the roof. They reached for the sky, like church towers searching for their creator. Following instructions, Harry made his way to the library.

Against tall walls, shelves stuffed with books stretched to the ceiling. Huge, stained glass windows stood to attention beside them, framed by sandstone arches. Etched into their glass, Saints and Sages of long ago allowed winter’s fresh, morning light to enter. They bathed the regal room in a sea of shades.

*Reckon there’s around forty of us,* Harry thought, counting the throng of heads, both boys and girls. Tongues wagging, there was quite a din. Satchels and gasmasks hung over shoulders. Some clutched books under arms. *I’ve brought no books*, he fretted. *Hope I’m not the odd one out*. Others carried hats, coats and knitted scarves. A few trailed the floor, scraping up dust. *Better find a seat before they’re all taken.* Harry’s darting eyes searched the room. *Not too close to the front,* he decided.

A long wooden desk stood in front of rows of chairs. A huge projector sat on top, pens, pencils, books and papers scattered around it. Three telephones, green, black and red, waited patiently for rings. Brown, braided wires dangled from their backs like thick, twisted vines.

Hats and coats removed, the recruits yapped noisily to whomever was sitting next to them. Some pulled pads and pencils from pockets. Others placed glasses onto noses. Harry saw R.A.F. officers chatting together in front of the desk, and felt proud. They alternately laughed then frowned, their conversation drifting.

Harry soaked up his surroundings and fellow recruits. Some looked too posh for his liking, he quickly decided. Sound like it too, he reckoned. He tapped his boots’ soles on the polished floor. Bet they’re all upper class, clever too, much cleverer than me. Wonder if anybody can fly an aeroplane, though? Surely that could come in handy.

‘Hello.’

Harry turned. A tall, thin girl was sitting down next to him, sliding her satchel underneath her chair. Long, black hair flowed down her back, her cheekbones high on a pretty face.

‘I’m Nancy, Nancy Bliss, but most people call me Raven.’

 ‘H...H…Hello. I’m Harry, Harry Smith.’

‘I saw you this morning,’ Raven said, smiling.

She tugged at the toggles on her black duffel coat, pulling at her mustard scarf.

‘I saw you too, getting out of your Alvis.’

‘Oh, that’s Marmaduke, Grandpa’s favourite car. He’s bonkers! Drives *far* too fast. We almost tangled with a tree on the way here!’

‘I love fast machines, especially Spitfires.’

‘Hurricanes are better.’

‘The Spitfire’s faster.’

 ‘Hurricanes are easier to fly - my brother told me.’

‘Bit of a tomboy, then?’

‘I suppose I am. It’s my brothers’ fault - blame them!’

‘Wish I had a brother. Have a younger sister though, her name’s Catherine.’

‘Bet you’ll miss her whilst you’re here.’

‘I certainly will.’

‘Who recommended you?’ Raven asked.

‘Lady Hedy Harrington.’

‘Wow, you’re lucky! I’ve heard of her heaps.’

‘Not surprised. She’s a pretty famous actress. What about you?’

‘Uncle Charles, or Group Captain Appleby to you. One of daddy’s friends.’

‘You’re lucky too, then. No chance of you failing selection.’

‘I don't know, Harry. Daddy says to try my best.’ Raven smiled, a glint appearing in her huge brown eyes.

‘What was your interview like? I was only a minute late but Captain Chivers demanded to know why. Gave me a rough time, until…’

‘Oh, I ended up with Captain Chivers too, who was *very* unfriendly. Told me I was useless, a failure.’

‘Same with me. How did you respond?’ Harry asked.

‘I told him he was being ridiculous, as I’ve only just arrived. And I asked him, how come I received an invitation if I was that stupid? Unless this was some sort of school for dimwits. At that point he burst out laughing. He seemed impressed with my Czech though.’

‘Wow, you speak Czech? So do I, my mum was born in Liberec, just north of the capital, Prague.’

‘I’m impressed, Harry. Yes, Grandma Beatrice’s cousin’s Czech you see and she has a house over there, in Brno. I spent many summers there and Alexandra taught me. Some days, we played this silly game – no English allowed, only Czech. Pots of fun!

Harry and Raven exchanged Czech sentences, playfully trying to catch each other out. ‘Do you know what this place is all about? Blackfriars, I mean?’

‘Grandpa wouldn’t tell me anything,’ Raven replied. ‘But I heard him telling daddy *Blackfriars* is Churchill’s idea and top secret.’

‘I wonder who’ll pass selection?’ Harry looked around.

‘Hopefully us!’ She crossed her fingers, eyes sparking.

\* *A member of the WRNS or Woman’s Royal Naval Service.*

**\*\*\***

‘Welcome to Bletchley Park,’ a voice boomed. ‘I hope you have a very pleasant stay with us.’

 *Colonel Topping’s line,* Harry thought, focussing his gaze on an RAF officer now addressing the room.

‘I’m Group Captain Charles Appleby. Commander of Blackfriars.’ His shiny brown hair, short and neat, had been slicked back with copious amounts of Brylcreem\*. The two sides to his thick, curved moustache failed to meet under his nose, the gap rather odd-looking.

Surprised, Harry glanced across at Raven. *So, the very person who recommended her, this “Uncle Charles”, was in charge of the whole shebang*. *Not much chance of you failing then,* he supposed. Then it occurred to him that it might be wise to be friends with Raven, to stay close. It might help him get noticed.

‘And I’m Wing Commander Singh,’ an Indian man said, his voice belonging to a distant land. His black moustache matched the shape of the pilot’s wings sewn onto his air force blue tunic. A neatly trimmed beard covered his dark face and a bright orange turban was sitting on his head.

‘Our directive from the Prime Minister, Mr Churchill, is as follows,’ Singh said. ‘To select and train young people from Britain’s illustrious empire. For a *Most Secret* unit.’

The slide-show projector beamed into life. *Blackfriars* appeared in huge black letters on the screen. Group Captain Appleby pointed a long cane at the word. ‘Every single one of you has been recommended to us by a trusted source. But, believe it or not, some have been sent home already. Captain Chivers is a dab hand at weeding out the obvious no-hopers.’

‘In order to progress to Blackfriars’ training,’ Wing Commander Singh added, ‘you *must* pass selection tests, both mental and physical, assessing your character *and* your potential.’

‘These tests will last for one week,’ Appleby announced. ‘And you will be rewarded for your efforts.’

‘After every test, you *may* be awarded a gold propeller,’ Singh said. He raised his hand high, displaying a miniature aircraft propeller. ‘And your propellers will be counted on Friday morning.’

‘Brains and courage, that’s what we’re looking for,’ Appleby added, pointing his cane at the sea of children’s faces.

‘*Yes, yes, yes,* but what is Blackfriars *exactly*?’ a boy sitting close to the front called out irritably. ‘That’s what everybody wants to know! Nobody’s told us anything yet.’

‘Excuse me?’ Singh asked, tugging his beard. ‘Do you always rudely interrupt people, *without* putting your hand up?’

‘I don’t think I’ve had the pleasure of your acquaintance, young man?’ Appleby asked, strolling over to the boy. He rested his cane on the top of the boy’s thick, blonde hair. The boy closed his eyes, gritting his teeth, expecting a sudden strike. ‘Well?’ Appleby asked, tapping the boy’s skull, waiting for an answer.

‘Malcolm Mapleton, Sir Richard Mapleton’s grandson.’

‘Ah, I should have guessed,’ Appleby said, glancing at Singh. ‘How is your grandfather?’

‘Still smoking too many Cuban cigars. He smells like Hitler’s armpits!’

Sniggers crept around the library. Appleby raised his eyebrows. ‘It may be in your interests to learn some manners, Mapleton, *whoever* your grandfather is. And always address me, Wing Commander Singh and any other member of staff as sir. Do I make myself clear?’

‘Yes.’

‘Yes what?’

‘Yes, sir.’

 \* A hair styling product for men

**Chapter 3**

Colonel Topping marched briskly along the path, swagger stick tucked under his arm. Dragging suitcases, the new recruits followed this military Pied Piper. He stopped in the middle of a wide, grassy courtyard. Then he shouted out names, pointing male and female recruits in different directions.

Harry headed to his allocated dormitory. Five single beds were set against each of the hut’s walls, grey blankets stretched over them. Perched above each middle bed was a grubby arched window, longing for a wet cloth.

‘Peace at last!’ somebody shouted, throwing his case onto his bed.

Harry hauled his suitcase onto a middle bed, pulling his satchel and gasmask box off his shoulder. He was just about to bounce down when a boy barged into him, his heavy suitcase striking the backs of Harry’s knees.

‘This is *my* bed, I’m afraid,’ Mapleton announced. ‘Move your stuff. I’m always by the window. Need the fresh air.’

Harry turned around. ‘Appleby’s right,’ he said, squinting. ‘Haven’t you heard of manners?’ He peered at Malcolm Mapleton, a short, stocky boy, his jaw chiselled like flint. A black shirt was sticking out from under his black pullover, its pointed collars long and droopy, like bats’ wings.

‘My favourite colour,’ Mapleton said, noticing Harry’s stare. Grandfather says black’s the best colour. Never gets dirty, colour of witches too!’

‘And Nazis,’ Harry sighed, shaking his head.

‘It’s called style, you wouldn’t understand,’ Mapleton declared, dragging his case onto Harry’s bed.

‘Black gets dirty too, Mapleton,’ Harry said, ‘everything does.’

‘But you can’t see it, that’s my point! Anyway, don’t you know who I am?’

‘Some old general’s grandson?’

‘General Sir Richard Mapleton’s, actually!’

‘Never heard of him.’

 ‘Well, never mind. Call me Mugsy, everybody else does.’ Mapleton held out a hand. Reluctantly, Harry shook it.

‘Gramps is one of the army’s chiefs of staff,’ Mugsy said. ‘About as important as you can be. *And* he’s a Member of Parliament, *and* Winston Churchill’s friend! He’s famous, Smith!’

‘Well, I’ve never heard of him.’

‘You wouldn’t have, listening to your accent.’

‘What do you mean?’

‘Nothing. You wouldn’t understand.’

Harry stiffened. ‘No, what do you mean?’

‘It doesn’t matter, Smith, don’t get a bloody bee in your bonnet.’

Harry narrowed his eyes.

Mugsy puffed out a long blow and smiled. ‘Anyway, can’t we have any *younger* officers around here? Don’t think I’ve met one under sixty yet.’

‘Some of them are rather old,’ Harry noted, still wondering what Mugsy meant. ‘Colonel Topping’s a funny bloke, though.’

‘He’s a dinosaur,’ Mugsy replied. ‘Should be on display at the Natural History Museum. Triceratops Topping! And Appleby? He needs a walking stick just to go swimming.’ He laughed. ‘So, what does your father do, Smith? In the war, I mean.’

‘He’s a pilot – Bomber Command… but he’s missing in action.’ Harry instantly became aware that the others boys in the dormitory were listening intently.

‘What happened?’

Harry glanced at all the glum, expectant faces. ‘His Lancaster was shot down over Berlin three months ago. No news yet.’

‘Well, if you’ve not heard anything from the Red Cross, he’s probably dead by now.’

Someone in the room muttered, ‘Insensitive git.’

Harry felt a hollowness fill his stomach. ‘Don’t you think I know that? Thanks for reminding me. Anyway, as Captain Chivers said to me, there’s always a chance he baled out. Maybe he made contact with the resistance. If he did, it means he’s not a prisoner of war, and so the Red Cross wouldn’t know.’

‘Clutching at straws if you ask me.’

‘Well, I didn’t ask you, Mugsy, did I?’

‘Fair enough. Anyway, what’s his rank?’

‘Sergeant.’

Mugsy pulled a face. ‘So, he isn’t a c*ommissioned* officer then? *Just* a sergeant?’

‘What’s that got to do with anything?’

‘Commoners and all that, Smith; I’m not sure what my grandad would have to say about that. You being here, I mean…’

Harry studied Mugsy a moment and seized him up. ‘Ah, I get it now. Think you’re cleverer than me, don’t you? Because of your posh accent and big house in London and-’

‘Money, Smith,’ Mugsy said as Harry’s face burned red. ‘It’s the most important thing in life. Buys you the finer things. Even buys you people, especially *commoners* like you. That’s what my grandad says. And he’s always right. Mapletons win at everything. We have done for centuries.’

‘Well your grandad’s wrong!’ Harry snapped, balling his fingers into fists.

 ‘Grandfather’s even friends with Prince Edward,’ Mugsy added, standing firm. ‘And King George! So, if I wanted to, I could get you kicked out of here before you’ve even started.’

‘Appleby hasn't said anything has he?’ Harry asked warily.

A devilish sparkle twinkled in Mugsy’s eyes as he jumped onto his stolen bed. Closing his eyes, he grimaced as his bottom landed, as if bouncing on a bed of nails. ‘Listen, Smith,’ he said, lying like a Roman Emperor. ‘I’m beginning to like you. So, if you want to pass selection, I have *contacts*.’

‘What *contacts?*’

Mugsy winked. Then tapped his temple, a tiny grin bending his lips. ‘*Contacts,* Smith! *Royal* contacts. *Political* contacts. Stick with me and I’ll make sure you pass.’

 ‘I think I can pass by myself, thanks,’ Harry replied. Shaking his head, he scooped up his belongings and found another bed.

‘Suit yourself,’ Mugsy shouted across the room. ‘But don’t blame me when you’re on your way home next Friday.’

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Intelligence, memory and code-breaking tests filled the mornings. Sprints and long distance runs, climbing rope ladders, and wading through mud and swift rivers pushed them to their limits in the afternoons. In the evenings, games of chess, draughts and Scrabble tested the young recruits further. At the end of each day, one or two were summoned to Appleby’s office and weren’t seen again. Their names and gold propellers vanished from the display in the corridor. There were no goodbyes or fond farewells; they simply weren’t at breakfast at Blackfriars the following morning.

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‘The Eiffel Tower,’ Singh declared. He pointed at a completed wooden model of the famous French landmark parked on a desk. ‘Your task is to assemble the pieces in the shortest possible time. Plans provided.’

Appleby added, ‘Today, we’re going to do things a little differently. I’m introducing an element of competition. You will be pitted against each other in duels.’ Appleby’s hand disappeared into a top hat. ‘Smith,’ he said, clutching a piece of folded paper. ‘Against…Mapleton!’

Harry groaned quietly to himself. *Out of all the recruits, why did it have to be him?* Gingerly, he rose to his feet.

Smirking, Mugsy eagerly made his way to the front.

‘Good luck, Harry,’ Raven whispered. ‘Show that buffoon how it’s done!’

Appleby struck a bell.

Quickly, Harry and Mugsy grabbed their timber pieces, trying to fit them together.

‘Finished!’ Mugsy exclaimed after less than one minute, his tall, wooden tower standing proudly on his desk.

Harry sighed, a dozen pieces still lying in front of him.

‘Hard luck, Smith,’ Appleby declared. ‘And well done, Mapleton. Your grandfather would be proud.’

Harry sank into his chair, deflated.

‘Hard luck, Harry.’ Raven reached across and rubbed her friend’s arm. ‘That puzzle’s more difficult than it looks.’

‘Yeah.’ Harry sighed, shutting off his ears and staring at the floor. *How did Mugsy do it so fast? Even if I did it one hundred times, I’d struggle to complete it in under sixty seconds*. He shot Mugsy a glance and saw him gloating in his victory. *Was there much more to Mugsy than met the eye? Beneath that annoying surface was there real talent and ability? Was he clever as well as arrogant?*

Two more recruits battled it out.

Harry pulled out his precious photograph and gazed at it. Flames suddenly leapt out of its gloss surface. Dad was grappling with his stricken aircraft’s controls, his screams shattering his Lancaster’s cockpit windows. The broken bomber plunged to earth, an enormous ball of flame like a speeding comet. And tears pricked Harry’s eyes. *I hope you baled out, dad, and that you’re in safe hands. Mum misses you. We both miss you. And I’m sorry about the puzzle, too. Mugsy thinks he’s better than us. Maybe he is. I don’t know. So, I’ll try to win next time. Make you proud of me, eh?*

‘Don’t let Mugsy get to you, Harry,’ Raven whispered. ‘You’ll have plenty of chances to get your own back.’

Harry looked up. ‘You know what Mugsy’s like, Raven. I’ll never hear the last of this.’

‘Who cares about that buffoon, Harry? You’re better than him and you know you are. Next time, sock it to him!’ Raven peered at Mugsy’s back and pretended to punch his head. ‘And I know you’re missing your dad, Harry.’

Harry closed his eyes. His dad’s parachute appeared, gently floating like a jellyfish drifting on an ocean current.