



Suffolk, England – Friday 6 September 1940

George was picking stones out of the trenches in the potato field when he heard the plane. He jumped up and scanned the sky, shielding his eyes against the sun's glare.

He couldn't see it first off, but then he spotted it, climbing up from the horizon into the clear blue space overhead. A Spitfire. He'd know the shape of those wings anywhere. And the sound of the engine too. The low hum which built to a blood-tingling roar as it approached.

It'd be from the local airbase: the one Charlie was stationed at. 'Course Charlie was still in training at the moment; but the minute he was finished he'd be up there

fighting alongside the best of 'em. In a Spitfire too with any luck, though he didn't know for definite because Charlie hadn't been allowed to say.

George was worried for him, but he couldn't help being proud too. His own brother, a sergeant in the RAF. What would Mum and Dad have made of that? As their faces swam into view, he felt the familiar ache in his chest. He blinked and fixed his eyes back on the plane. For a moment, as it rose higher still, he was up there with it, swooping and soaring like a hawk. But then, as the Spitfire dipped its nose and levelled out, another noise cut through the air – a high-pitched saw, like the sound of an angry wasp.

George swung round. A second plane was approaching. Lower down than the first and flying fast. Not a Spitfire. Not making that noise. A Hurricane, maybe? He scrunched his eyes. From this distance, it was hard to say...

He turned back to look at the Spitfire. It was climbing again now, engine a distant growl, wings shining silver in the sunlight. Then, as the other plane flew beneath it, the Spitfire tipped on its side and arced down. For a moment, George thought it was play-fighting and would pull up short. But it kept on coming, the noise from its engine tearing through him, sending hot and cold shivers up and down his spine.

And then it opened fire.

*Rat-tat-tat-a-tat! Rat-tat-tat-a-tat!*

As the target pulled away sharply, George spotted the black swastika painted on its tail. It was a Messerschmitt

109. He could see that now. A dogfight! And here he was – George Penny – with a grandstand view.

The Spitfire tore after the enemy fighter and fired again, leaving a trail of white smoke behind it. The Messerschmitt swerved to avoid it. George held his breath, waiting for it to turn back and fight. But it didn't. Instead, it took off back in the direction it had come. As he watched it disappear from view, there was a roar above him. The Spitfire did a victory loop and tipped its wings. George waved at it and punched the air. Old Hitler might have scored one against them at Dunkirk, but if he had thought that was the end of things, he hadn't bargained for the RAF. They'd been stopping the Jerries up in the skies now for nearly two months!

A door banged in the distance. George's heart lurched. Bill Jarvis. It must be. He shot a look over his shoulder. There was no sign of him yet. He glanced down at the half-full bucket of stones. Better get back to work. Last time Jarvis had caught him slacking, he'd given him such a beating he hadn't been able to sit down for a week.

He gritted his teeth. If only Charlie knew what it was really like here... but there'd been no way of telling him. He couldn't send him a letter, because Jarvis had stolen the money Charlie had given him the day he'd arrived. And then Charlie had written and said all leave had been cancelled. Anyway, he didn't want to make a fuss. Not after Charlie had gone to so much trouble to find him somewhere to stay in the first place.

He looked back up, hoping to catch one final glimpse of

the Spitfire before it headed back to base. It was still up there, flying high above him. But now two more black shapes had appeared in the sky to its right. Fighters. Enemy ones – and bearing down fast.

'Watch out!' He jumped up and down, waving and pointing frantically, but it was no use. The pilot was never going to see him from up there.

And then the two Messerschmitts were upon him, all guns blazing.

There was a flash of silver as the pilot rolled the Spitfire and veered into a steep dive before pulling up hard and climbing steeply away.

George tensed. *Come on! Come on! You can do it!*

But suddenly the engine sputtered and the plane began to spiral down. As it struggled to regain height, the two Messerschmitts closed in and fired again. And this time the bullets found their target. A trail of thick grey smoke poured from the Spitfire's rear end.

'No!' George's stomach clenched as the plane zigzagged crazily across the sky. He willed it to lift up again but it kept on falling, plummeting towards the coast like a spent rocket. He couldn't bear to watch... He scrunched his eyes tight shut. A few seconds later there was a thudding bang. He groaned and hugged his arms to his chest.

'Oi, you! City Boy!' A rough hand gripped his shoulder and swung him round. 'I'm not given' yer board and lodgen' so's yer can stand there dreamen'.

George blinked. The stocky figure of Bill Jarvis stood before him, legs straddling the potato trench, hands fisted

on his hips.

'There was a Spitfire... It—' George pointed up at the sky. But all that was left was a criss-cross of white vapour trails and a plume of black smoke on the distant horizon.

'The sooner yer stop gawpen' at some young fool tryen' to prove himself a hero, and get back to yer work, the better.' Jarvis stepped forwards, right hand slipping to his belt buckle, a ferrety glint in his eyes.

A spurt of anger shot through George. For a heart-thumping moment he pictured himself picking up the bucket, swinging it at Bill Jarvis's head and making a run for it. But as Jarvis took another step towards him, his courage leaked away. Cheeks burning, he lowered into a squat and grubbed up another stone from the gritty brown soil.

'That's more like it.' Bill Jarvis's face cocked into its familiar sneer. 'Now, I'm off into town to meet a contact of mine and do a bit of tradin'. When I come back I want this whole trench picked clean. If not, yer'll be goen' to bed hungry again.' Flexing his knuckles, he shot George a warning look, then turned and stomped back across the field and through the rusty farmyard gate.

George kept his head down. When he was sure Jarvis had gone, he got to his feet again and peered back up at the sky. There was no sign of the two Messerschmitts, but the plume of smoke was still there, fading now into the blue. Had the pilot managed to bail out before the plane hit the ground? He hoped so. But what if the same thing happened to Charlie? He shivered and did his best to squash the thought back down.

A series of frantic barks rang out from across the yard.

'Shut yer noise, fleaball!' There was a sudden yelp followed by the rattle of metal and the bang of a door. 'That'll teach yer, yer mangy cur.'

The knot in George's stomach grew tighter. It was bad enough when Jarvis took the belt to him; but it hurt even more when he gave poor Spud a hiding. The dog was the only good thing about being here. That, and being close to Charlie. Spud had been near to starving when George had first arrived; hadn't even had a name until he gave him one, though he'd kept it a secret from Jarvis.

He slid over to the gate, staying low to keep out of sight. A cart laden with a bunch of potato sacks stood in the sun-scorched yard. Bill Jarvis was up front, shunting his moth-eaten pony between the wooden shafts. There was no sign of Spud. What'd he done with him? George pulled back to avoid being spotted. He was desperate to check on him, but he couldn't risk it. Not while that great bully was still around. A bead of sweat trickled down the side of his face. He wiped it away with his shirt-sleeve and waited.

At last, after what seemed like an age, Jarvis finished hitching up the pony and climbed on board. At a flick of his whip, the animal jerked into motion. The cart jolted forwards, scattering a bunch of scrawny chickens before turning out through the gate and on to the stony track that led towards town.

George waited until it had disappeared from view. Then, yanking open the gate, he dashed into the yard. He snatched a look at the cottage, sagging under the weight of

its mouldy thatched roof. Spud wouldn't be in there - Jarvis never let him indoors; even at night. He cocked his head and listened again. The cart was a distant rumble now, mixed in with the faint cry of gulls echoing up from the river. Above it a new sound pricked his ears. A stomach-twisting whine of pain. It was coming from the ramshackle barn opposite.

Tearing across to it, he heaved the door open and stepped inside. He blinked against the dark, nose wrinkling at the sour-sharp stink of soiled straw.

'Spud? Where are you, boy?' There was a rasp of metal from the darkest corner and the whimpering started up again. George crept towards it, heart thumping, afraid of what he might find. A black furry shape shifted against the wall and the whimper became a low growl.

It's only me, boy. Don't be frightened. I ain't going to hurt you.' George knelt down and held out his hand. As a biscuit-brown snout poked out from the shadows, there was another cold clink of metal.

George's stomach lurched at the sight of the chain.

'Oh, Spud! How could he do that to you?' Tugging the end of it free from the hook Jarvis had fixed it to, he gently worked it loose from the dog's matted fur and slipped it over his head. 'Wait there, boy. I'll get you something to drink.' He picked up an old milk-churn lid and ran out into the yard. Filling it with water from the pump, he hurried back into the barn.

'Here you go.' George knelt in the straw and watched as the dog dipped his head and drank long and hard.

He was fetching more water when he heard the crunch of bicycle tyres on the gravel outside. He let the pump-handle fall and watched as the portly figure of the postman came wobbling down the trackway towards the farm.

As the bike ground to a halt, a flash of excitement tore through him. What if it was a letter from Charlie?

'Mornin'.' The postman clambered off the bike and propped it against the wall. He had the same weird way of talking they all had round here. Puffing out his cheeks, he took off his hat and walked through the gate towards him. 'See that dogfight, did you?'

George shivered as the last moments of the Spitfire's flight played again like a newsreel inside his head.

'Looks like old Jerry got the better of us in that one. Still, at least our lad'll live to fight another day.' The postman came to a stop in front of him. He pulled a damp-looking handkerchief out of his pocket and mopped at the sheen of sweat glistening on his forehead.

George's stomach fluttered. 'You mean he bailed out?'

The postman nodded. 'I saw the parachute comen' down when I was on my way up here. Let's just hope he didn't have a rocky landen.' The sooner he's back up there keepen' those Jerries at bay, the better.' He gave a small cough. 'Mister Jarvis about, is he?'

George tensed. 'No. He's gone into town.'

The postman shot him a sympathetic look. 'I feel sorry for you, lad. Crooked Bill's a hard taskmaster and no mistaken' it.' He frowned. 'How come you've ended up with him anyway?'

George felt his cheeks flush. He didn't want him knowing the whole story. It was embarrassing. And besides, it was none of his business anyway. He licked his lips and toed at a weed growing from beneath the wall next to him. 'My brother's training to be a pilot at the airbase. He thought I'd be safer out here than back in London.'

'Not here you won't.' The postman's frown deepened. 'Haven't you been listenin' to the news? Old Herr Hitler's plannen' to invade any day now. All this' – he waved his handkerchief at the sky – 'is part of his cunnen' plan. Getten' the Luftwaffe's planes to try and soften us up first before he makes his big push by sea. Which means if he and his Nastics come this way, we'll be right in his path.'

George's eyes widened.

The postman looked over his shoulder. As he bent in closer, George got a whiff of salty-smelling sweat. 'Rumour has it, some of them Home Guard volunteers have been holed up in the woods hereabouts on special trainen' just in case. Not that them and a bit of barbed wire on the beach'll stop the Jeries if they do decide to come.' He stuffed his handkerchief into his trouser pocket and cleared his throat again. 'Anyway, don't mind me.' Opening the leather satchel which hung from his shoulder, he rummaged inside and fished out a grey envelope. 'Ere y'are.' George put the milk-churn lid down on the ground and dried his hands hurriedly on his trousers. As he took the letter from the postman, his heart lifted then sank again. It was Charlie's handwriting all right, but it was addressed to Bill Jarvis.

'I'll be off then.' The postman climbed back up on his bike. 'And if I were you, sonny, I'd try and stay on Crooked Bill's good side. He's got a nasty temper on him, that one.' With a wave of his hand, he swayed off down the track in the direction of town.

George pulled a face. Good side? Bill Jarvis didn't have a good side. Leastways there'd been no sign of it in the five weeks since he'd got here. And why was Charlie writing to Jarvis and not him? He ran his fingers over the familiar inky scrawl and frowned. There was only one way to find out.

Stuffing the envelope into his pocket, he scooped up the milk-churn lid and headed back inside the barn.