

PROLOGUE

1940, London

‘You comin’ Charlie?’

Charlie Horowitz looks up from the kitchen table where he’s reading that evening’s *Standard*. His cousin and best friend, Izzy Conway, known on the Thames as “Merlin”, is slipping on his leather jacket.

‘Where to?’ asks Charlie.

‘Thought I’d grab a quick one at the *Prospect*.’

Charlie frowns. His cousin, tall, muscular and possessing matinee idol looks, never goes out in the evening, even to the local, without looking sharp: clean shirt, razor-creased trousers, polished shoes and Brylcreem on his sun-bleached locks. But Izzy is still wearing his working lighterman’s clothes, stained baggy trousers, collarless shirt rolled up to the elbows and trademark leather cap perched on the back of his head.

‘Dressed like that?’ asks Charlie.

‘You’re not taking Charlie to the pub again, Izzy,’ intervenes the matriarch of the home, Beatrice Conway, as she clears the remaining plates and slides the rest of the fish pie into the oven to await her husband’s return from his shift. ‘Charlie’s underage,’ she says. ‘His mother’d kill me if she knew.’

‘Well, she’s in Wales, so I don’t suppose she’ll ever find out. Not unless you tell ’er,’ replies Izzy with a wink directed at Charlie.

The remaining person in the room, Jonjo Milstein, swallows his last mouthful of lokshen pudding and speaks as he pushes the bowl away. ‘Come on Bea,’ he chides gently. ‘Charlie does a man’s job on the river, better than most men twice his age. Let the boy go; the odd pint won’t kill him.’

Milstein is in his seventies, bronzed by a lifetime working the Thames and tough as whipcord. He’s the only member of the family who can speak to his formidable daughter like this and get away with it without an earful. He waves his hand at the young men, shooing them out of the room.

‘I’ll look after ’im,’ says Izzy as he disappears into the hall.

Charlie stands, dragging his jacket off the back of the chair. ‘I’ll be fine, Aunt Bea,’ he reassures her. He sneaks up behind the large woman as she fills a bowl from the kettle to wash up, and kisses her loudly on her ruddy cheek. ‘Thanks for supper.’

‘It’s called “tea” in this ’ousehold!’ she calls after him, but as usual Charlie’s good manners and thoughtfulness have won her round.

Over the last several months she’s watched an unhappy brooding teenager develop into a confident and outgoing young man, and she loves having him in her home, despite her sister-in-law’s thin-lipped fury. Millie Horowitz wants her elder son to return to the safety of rural Wales where the family has been evacuated. Charlie refuses. He’s a different person in this crowded house with its noise, laughter and ever-present smell of Jewish cooking, and he relishes the difference.

The shabby family home of his aunt Bea and uncle Jacob, close enough to the river to hear the lapping water in the still of night, is quite unlike the spotlessly clean, rule-bound home of the Horowitz family on British Street — now demolished — where he felt constantly criticised and permanently on edge. In the months since he slipped silently out of the shared Welsh farmhouse to clamber aboard a freight train to London, returning to the rubble-strewn East End streets he knows so well, he has been happier than he can ever remember, notwithstanding the Luftwaffe’s bombs and strafing, and the daily diet of a lighterman working long shifts on the river. Charlie is fifteen and, accordingly, invulnerable; surrounded by daily death and dismemberment, he cannot conceive that it could possibly happen to him.

He follows Izzy out of the front door onto the deserted street where the older boy waits. It’s only a five-minute walk from the Conways’ tall terraced house on Juniper Street to the *Prospect of Whitby* public house at Wapping Wall but, to Charlie’s surprise, instead of turning east, Izzy goes the other way, north towards Cable Street.

‘Er —’ queries Charlie, but Izzy puts his finger to his lips to demand silence and Charlie complies.

Although twice his breadth and almost the same height, Charlie is a couple of years younger than Izzy, and there is a whiff of hero-worship in his admiration for his charismatic older cousin. Charlie has been sharing a room with Izzy ever since he was pulled from the bombed house on British Street where, unnoticed by the authorities, he’d been living rough.

Within days he was following his cousin in and out of East End boozers, West End dance halls and no end of scrapes.

They round the corner into King David Lane and Izzy opens the door of a lock-up garage. It usually houses a tangle of ropes, boxes, spare buoys — all the tools and paraphernalia required of a Thames lighterage business — but to Charlie's surprise the space has been tidied sufficiently to make room for a small dark-coloured van.

Izzy gets in. 'Gotta little job to do,' he explains opaquely. He leans across to the passenger door, opening it quietly. 'You coming?'

Charlie shrugs and does as instructed. Izzy starts the engine. They back out onto the road and Izzy re-locks the garage door.

'Where're we going?' asks Charlie as Izzy rejoins him in the cab.

'You'll see.'

They turn north onto Commercial Road. Air raid sirens start wailing five minutes later as they enter West India Avenue.

'Perfect!' says Izzy.

Charlie examines his cousin's face, finding not sarcasm but determination. 'Seriously?'

Five minutes later, Izzy brings the van to a halt on Back Lane outside the docks. The road here is narrowed by enormous piles of rubble and burned-out vehicles, evidence of the previous nights' bombing. Izzy winds down the driver's window and inclines his head, listening intently. River smells and smoke drift into the cab. The sirens are still sounding but the skies seem clear; no sound of approaching aircraft and silence from the ack-ack batteries. Searchlight beams criss-cross the night sky above the buildings, seeking targets.

London holds its breath.

Izzy turns to Charlie and speaks urgently. 'Number Two warehouse on North Quay was hit two nights ago, and the timber they was using to patch it up went up in flames last night. So there's no back wall. Anyone can just walk in.'

'And why would they do that?' asks Charlie, knowing the answer.

''Cos it's a bonded warehouse. I had a scout round this morning. The first floor's full of cases of brandy. Half were destroyed but...'

'Half weren't.'

‘Exactly. Look, Charlie, you can stay in the van if you want, but I’m going to lift a couple while the raid’s on. It’ll be deserted. And the way things’re going, them cases probably won’t last the night anyway, so where’s the harm?’

He’s right about that, concedes Charlie silently. Since the Blitz began in September, half the Port of London has burned to the ground and there’s no sign of Hitler letting the other half off. For a fleeting moment Charlie imagines his father’s expression at the prospect of his elder son, the quiet studious one, looting a bonded warehouse in the middle of an air raid. Honest in every fibre of his being, the little East End tailor would have beaten his strapping son until his arms ached, while at the same time lecturing him on the Seventh Commandment. Probably in Hebrew.

Izzy reaches behind him and lifts two Zuckerman helmets from the back of the cab. He hands one to Charlie who turns the thin steel round in his hands, noting the white “W” painted on the front.

‘What poor warden’s doing without his tonight?’ he asks.

‘None,’ replies Izzy with a smile. ‘I picked them up yesterday. Cost me a bag of coal off that flat-iron.’

Charlie pulls on the helmet, turns to his cousin and grins. ‘All right. What’re we waiting for?’

Charlie’s first experience of looting appears to go as smoothly as Izzy predicted. They drive up to the warehouse, walk through the missing north wall, climb the charred stairs to the first floor and carry four timber cases between them back down the stairs and into the waiting van. Twelve minutes later, with the sound of the approaching Luftwaffe bombers and their escorts building like thunder from the south, and ack-ack shells starting to burst above them, the two thieves are driving back up Commercial Road. Neither notices another lorry, its engine idling as it sits in the shadows between the warehouse and the wharf. Neither notices the men wearing balaclava helmets who occupy it — men with the same idea as Izzy, but who timed their arrival just a few minutes too late.

Despite the sirens and the approaching death from above, Commercial Road, a main artery into the City of London from the east, is surprisingly busy with latecomers running hither and thither towards basements and Andersons. A newspaper seller is still locking up his kiosk on the pavement and there are two toms leaning against the wall of a pub in their high heels and

painted-on stocking seams, perhaps hoping for last-minute business in the dark of a nearby shelter.

‘Pity about that pint,’ says Charlie.

Izzy turns his head towards Charlie and winks conspiratorially. ‘Oh, I think we might still —’

‘Stop!’ cries Charlie, his attention distracted by movement on the periphery of his vision and a familiar *plop-plop* sound. Izzy hammers the brakes and the van skids sideways to a halt.

They have driven into a shower of incendiaries. The bombs bounce off the pavements and tarmac all around them, fizzing like fireworks but not yet alight. Charlie glances to his right; the two young women are trapped against the wall. Before Izzy can engage reverse, Charlie is out of the passenger door, wrenching off his steel helmet. He races across the road towards the women, judging the bombs nearest to them. He selects his target as he runs and spins his helmet sideways. It’s a perfect shot; the helmet lands directly on top of the incendiary to one side of the women, continuing to rotate clockwise on its rim as it settles.

‘Here!’ he shouts, beckoning urgently, and gestures to the path he’s made safe. The women clatter toward him on their stiletto heels. Even before the helmet has ceased turning, it glows first red hot, then white hot and then, before Izzy’s eyes, it disintegrates as heat and light fan out from it, but the precious three or four seconds Charlie has bought are sufficient. He slides back onto the bench seat of the van, squeezing close to Izzy to make room for both women. They’re right on his heels, and the cab is suddenly awash with cheap perfume and flapping skirts.

‘Go!’ orders Charlie, a stranger now perched on his lap, and Izzy slams the vehicle into reverse, spins it round and accelerates out of danger.

A few minutes later they pull up outside the *Prospect of Whitby*. The cousins have been caught at the pub during air raids before, and are banking on access to its cellar. As long as it’s not already full they’ll be reasonably safe and, importantly, might even be served a drink or two while they wait for the all-clear. The young women, who have declared their names to be Louise and May, agree to join them.

‘I don’t like the idea of leaving the van out in the open,’ says Izzy. ‘You go down, I’ll drive to the lock-up and run back.’

Charlie frowns doubtfully. 'Don't risk it, Izzy. Come down with us.'

Izzy shakes his head and Charlie knows he'd be wasting his breath to argue. Once Izzy has made up his mind, no amount of reasoning will ever dissuade him. 'Go on, I shan't be a sec,' he insists, and he engages gear and revs the engine impatiently.

'Don't be long, gorgeous,' instructs Louise, blowing him a kiss before sliding out of the cab.

Fifteen minutes later, Charlie and the two women are squashed shoulder to shoulder with twenty other refugees from the air raid in the cellar of the *Prospect*, glasses in hand. Charlie and his new friends are sitting with several others on the cold flagstones underneath a long oak table on which is stacked a pyramid of empty beer barrels.

One of the oldest waterside public houses in London, for over 400 years *The Prospect of Whitby* has been a favourite haunt of smugglers, footpads and pickpockets, and Charlie likes knowing he's the latest in a long line of humans and contraband to have been hidden here over the centuries.

With every thud of a bomb landing on the streets above them, dust from the ancient ships' beams that now form the low ceiling drifts down to settle on the table and their protruding legs. May, a plump girl with a perfect cupid's bow of a mouth brightly outlined in red lipstick, has taken a fancy to Charlie. Or, he concedes phlegmatically, she'd seen her friend's interest in Izzy and took what was left.

Charlie is a well-muscled young man and he looks a good few years older than he is. His figure, dark complexion, dark eyes and unruly black curly hair attract the glances of many a young woman. But he's a realist; whenever they are up West, Izzy's film-star features are inevitably the centre of attention; women, and some men, are drawn to the young lighterman like moths to a flame.

May's right hand clutches her drink as her left runs down Charlie's massive forearm.

'How old are you anyway?' she whispers.

'Eighteen,' lies Charlie distractedly. Where the hell is Izzy? he thinks; he should have been back long before now.

There's a heavy explosion above them, and the cellar reverberates like the inside of a drum. The single light bulb dims, flickers and dies as power to the street is interrupted. The cellar is plunged into total darkness.

Hot words are breathed into Charlie's ear. 'You was ever so brave,' says May, apparently unmoved by the bombs above, and suddenly her small hands are all over him, touching, caressing and undoing. Charlie nestles his head blindly into the soft angle between the fur collar of her coat and her neck, realising that despite being pressed against total strangers and at risk of imminent death — indeed, perhaps because of that very peril — May ... will.

The sound of the Heinkel aircraft engines above them fades to the north. Another few minutes pass in the darkness, but before May's soft little hands have finished their act of kindness Charlie gently and reluctantly pushes them away. It's now almost thirty minutes since Izzy left them and Charlie is seriously worried. He tucks himself away and buttons his flies.

'Back in a sec,' he mutters and, excusing himself, he stands and pushes blindly through the crowd in the direction of the stairs. Ignoring shouted protests, he fumbles for the stair rail, climbs upwards, opens the door and enters the public bar.

Expecting it to be empty, he's surprised to find shadowy figures in the darkness, slivers of light from around the blackout blinds illuminating their movements. The skies are now silent, but the people in the bar seem not to have heard Charlie's entry.

One man is only a pace or two away from Charlie but facing away. He wears what seems in the half-light to be an unusually long woollen hat which descends almost to the nape of his neck. It takes Charlie a second to realise that he's looking at a balaclava, partially rolled up at the front to expose the man's face. The man is intently watching another, one who stands with his back to them both, his feet widely spaced. He's swinging his arms at something, making a *doof-doof* noise reminiscent of that made by Charlie's gloved hands as they thud into a heavy punchbag at the gym. Charlie takes a step to his left to see what the second man is doing and realises with a shock that he's pounding his fists into a third figure whose blond hair hangs in a shaft of light: Izzy.

The lighterman stands in a pose reminiscent of Jesus: arms outstretched at shoulder height, head lolling onto his chest. His knees sag but he is held upright by his wrists which are somehow tied at the height of the bar. The *doof-doof* sound is made by the punches thundering into Izzy's unprotected chest and torso as the man beating him swings his arms powerfully, pivoting from the waist. The bar is silent but for the grunts of the attacker as he

lands heavy, methodical, blows to Izzy's unprotected face and abdomen. He is beating Izzy to death. He stops for a second to catch his breath.

'Let me have another go!' hisses the spectator.

Charlie casts around for a weapon, stoops and lifts a wooden bar stool by its feet. As the second man turns at the sound, Charlie brings the stool round in an arc and it crashes against his head. He collapses silently. The stool clatters out of Charlie's grasp and onto the flagstones, causing the other man to pause and turn.

Even in the poor light, Charlie knows him instantly: Alec Bledsoe; a Blackshirt, one of the street-corner demagogues despised and feared by the Jewish community. Formerly one of Sir Oswald Mosley's lieutenants, he's one of the fascist thugs who takes joy in terrorising Jewish families and smashing up their East End businesses. He stands with his fists raised, half-turned towards Charlie, a scowl on his heavy features.

'Best piss off, mate, or you'll get the same. This ain't nothing to do with you.' Charlie doesn't answer. 'Look,' says Bledsoe, indicating with a jerk of his head Izzy's motionless body, 'he's a fucking Jewboy looter on my patch. And he won't tell me where it's stashed. So let me get on, will ya?'

For the first time Bledsoe notices the absence of his companion. His eyes flick round the bar, scanning the shadows and finally land on the crumpled darker heap by Charlie's feet. He does an almost comical double-take and then, with a roar, charges at Charlie like a bull, at the very instant as the all-clear begins to sound.

Charlie's an accomplished boxer, a London schoolboy champion and, after several months working on the River, at the peak of his physical fitness, but Bledsoe is twice his weight and age. However, judging by Bledsoe's puffing and blowing even when attacking a defenceless man, Charlie guesses he's out of condition and is probably a lot slower than he. He sways out of Bledsoe's advance and slams a punch into the other's forehead as he goes past. Bledsoe skids and turns, but before he can position himself Charlie follows up with a combination to the body and dances back on his toes as he would in the ring.

Suddenly all the lights in the bar are illuminated as the electricity supply is restored, and Charlie sighs inwardly with relief, assuming that Bledsoe will now make a run for it. Instead, the older man wipes his face with the back of his hand and launches himself again. Charlie bends under the other's swing and comes up again fast, hitting Bledsoe with another two-

punch combination, a jab to the nose which produces a spurt of blood and a fierce punch to the abdomen. The breath whooshes out of the older man's lungs and he bends at the waist, his guard dropping, as if looking for something on the floor.

As Bledsoe tries to force some air back into his lungs Charlie seizes his opportunity, steps back and launches a right-handed uppercut that starts almost at Bledsoe's knees, connects with the underside of his jaw, and ends its arc of travel above Charlie's left ear. It is perhaps the most beautiful punch Charlie has ever thrown.

Bledsoe's body describes a retreating arc, his head slamming on the floor. He's only semi-conscious, his body floppy and his eyes unfocused but, before he can recover, Charlie is astride his chest, raining blows to each side of his face, left to the head, right to the head, left to the head.

A hand grabs Charlie's raised arm from behind but he shrugs it off and continues to punch. More people combine to haul Charlie, still trying to land blows, off Bledsoe's prone body. Charlie turns, struggling, ready to fight whoever has intervened, to find half the people from the cellar, including May and Louise, staring at him.

'That's enough, Charlie,' croaks a weak voice from the direction of the bar.

The familiar voice penetrates the red mist and Charlie subsides. He turns towards the bar. Izzy's face is a mass of bruises and lacerations. There's so much blood, there's barely a patch of pink skin. Blood has stained the front of his clothing from just under his chin to his mid-thighs. But one eye is open, and he is speaking, albeit indistinctly.

'Enough,' he repeats, spitting blood and a tooth from mashed lips. 'Would someone please untie me?'

For a split-second nothing happens, but then the bar comes alive with movement. People rush to each side of Izzy and support him while others untie the ropes binding his wrists. He's half-carried to a chair and someone gets a bar towel to staunch the blood flowing from his cuts. Someone else fills a glass with brandy and holds it to Izzy's lips. People crowd around Bledsoe and his associate. The latter groans from the floor and is helped to sit up. Someone tries to get a call through the overwhelmed telephone exchange for an ambulance. Charlie finds himself crowded to the back of the group. He's aware of May's eyes on him, re-evaluating the stranger with whom she was recently so intimate.

The barman kneels next to Bledsoe's still form. 'It's that bastard, Bledsoe,' he announces, his fingers feeling for a pulse.

More eyes fix on Charlie. Bledsoe's reputation as a tough guy, one with influential and dangerous friends, runs through East London. No one has ever stood up to him before; certainly no one has ever knocked him out. It dawns on Charlie that there are going to be repercussions.

'Can someone give me a hand?' says the barman. 'I ain't too sure...'

A woman with a nurse's uniform visible under her coat pushes her way through the watchers and joins the barman kneeling at Bledsoe's side. She opens his collar further and places a hand under his chin, feeling for a jugular pulse. She leans over, placing her ear close to the unconscious man's gaping mouth. Everyone in the bar is silent. It's a few seconds before she eventually speaks.

'He's dead,' she says simply, straightening up.

All remaining heads in the bar turn towards Charlie.

'I had no choice,' he explains. His voice is tremulous and, despite his size, Charlie suddenly looks like a lost boy. 'Honest! They were killing Izzy.'

