PROLOGUE

Standing in the bright spring sunshine, the Reverend John Grundy ushered the departed on her way in the time-honoured fashion.

"We now commit her body to the ground; earth to earth, ashes to ashes, dust to dust; in the sure and certain hope of the resurrection to eternal life."

Behind the vicar, a young lady stooped to the ground, picked up a handful of earth and dropped it onto the coffin. Head bowed, she closed her eyes and prayed for a moment before turning to thank the cleric and shake his hand. From a respectful distance, an elderly man and woman looked on. As the pallbearers returned to the church, the couple advanced. Dressed in black, her face hidden behind a veil, the woman reached out and took the young lady's hand, gently pressed it and conveyed her condolences. The collar of his overcoat turned up to his face, the man said nothing. Seconds later, they departed, leaving the young lady alone with her loss.

Resting on their spades, two gravediggers waited patiently. Conscious that she was keeping the men from their work, the young lady cast them a brief smile before turning to read the inscription on the headstone resting by the graveside:

Jane Connolly

26 February 1919 – 18 May 1966

Wife of Tristan

Much Loved Mother of Grace

Rest in Peace Mum

Lifting the fingers of her right hand to her lips, the young lady lowered herself to one knee and transferred a gentle kiss onto the prone headstone. Moments later, her farewell complete, she rose to her feet and left the graveyard.

CHAPTER ONE

A Foreign Field

"Smile for the camera," encouraged the photographer crouching behind the tripod.

Tom Cole did his best to comply, but his heart wasn't in it.

"Hold the smile … nearly there … got you," confirmed the photographer quietly.

The whirring of the camera shutter signalled the end of Tom's ordeal.

"Thank God for that," he said as he strolled across the drawing room towards his parents. "Can I take this off now?"

Having removed the Victoria Cross from the breast of his tunic, Tom weighed it briefly in the palm of his hand.

"If it were me, I'd wear it all the time," said Edward, who, aged sixteen, thought the war a terrific adventure.

"Here then," said Tom, tossing the medal to his brother. "Look after it until I get back."

Edward pouched the catch and smiled.

It was January 1917, and Tom was about to return to his regiment. His ten days' leave at Blackberry Hill, the Cole family home located on the outskirts of Keswick, had flown like hope from catastrophe. A battle-hardened veteran at just twenty-two, the recently promoted captain was impatient to return to the carnage. Far better, he thought, to confront his fate head-on than cower before it. Staring out of the

drawing room's large bay window, he lingered to bid farewell to some old friends: the peaks of Skiddaw and Latrigg to the east, Catbells and High Spy to the west and, stretching south below him, its surface gently rippling in the pale winter sunshine, Derwentwater.

Before the war, Tom Cole had harboured two ambitions: to teach history and to play cricket. The call to arms in 1914 changed all that. The enthusiasm of those rushing to enlist was infectious. Encouraged by his father and eager to do his duty, Tom completed his degree at Durham University before accepting a commission with the 5th Battalion, King's Own Border Regiment. In April 1915, Second Lieutenant Cole saw his first action at the Second Battle of Ypres and was forever changed. By the end of the year, now promoted to full lieutenant, Tom's only ambition was to survive.

It was on the 28th of September 1916, during the Battle of Thiepval Ridge, that Tom won his Victoria Cross. On the third day of the battle, Captain Percival, intent on gaining higher ground, led his men across the ridge. Almost immediately, an enemy machine gun opened fire. Within a minute, nearly a third of the advancing line lay dead or wounded. His body pressed into the cratered terrain, Sergeant Holmes grimaced as enemy bullets roiled the earth around him. Raising his head slightly, he saw Captain Percival running across the eighty yards of killing ground in a desperate attempt to silence the gun. From his position further along the line, a terror-stricken Tom Cole observed the heroic charge and awaited the inevitable outcome. When the German gunners found their target, Captain Percival, bullets tearing through his tunic, descended slowly, gracefully almost, to the ground. Distracted by the captain's suicidal advance, the German gun crew belatedly noticed the young officer now bearing down on them from the other side of the line. Deaf to the encouragement that chased him, impervious to the fear that only seconds before had paralysed him, Tom Cole was just thirty yards from his objective when the nozzle of the machine gun jerked in his direction. Throwing himself to the ground, he pulled the pin from a Mills bomb and bowled it overarm towards the gun. The grenade exploded immediately upon reaching its target. Tom never heard it.

Scrambling forward, he delivered a second grenade and again hit the ground. Seconds later, he was inside the trench. Confronted by the only surviving member of the gun crew, Tom did for him with a single shot from his revolver. Oblivious to the commotion of war, Tom calmly travelled the trench, slaughtering those in his way. The sound of shouting, English shouting, suddenly assaulted his senses. The fear came shrieking back. The spell was broken. The company was on the charge.

"I repeat. Will you please accept our surrender?"

The desperate pleading of the German officer, his arms raised aloft, finally registered. Slightly touched by the politeness of the request, Tom hesitated for a couple of seconds before answering.

"Accepted. Order your men to ground their weapons and raise their hands."

The officer barked out the order. Ignoring the risk, Tom mounted the lip of the trench.

"Cease fire!" he bellowed. "Cease fire!"

Tom watched with envy as the German officer led his men into captivity. For them, the carnage was over; they would survive, they had a future. Within an hour, Tom was in the large tent that facilitated the field hospital. Bloodied, bandaged and dying, Captain Percival lay motionless on a wooden cot.

"You took it then," gasped the captain, his ruddy cheeks smeared with mud, "you took the trench."

This was not a question but a statement of fact.

"We couldn't have done it without you, sir," said Tom.

"Heard you took them on single-handed. Was that wise?"

Tom forced a weak smile.

"Can't think who gave me that idea."

His life rapidly evaporating, the captain beckoned Tom closer.

"A favour."

"Anything," whispered Tom.

"Write to my parents ... Make something up about how this mess of a war is worth fighting ... Try to convince them that my going wasn't in vain ... Soften the blow if you can ... I'm afraid this will hit them very hard."

The captain fell silent before rallying to impart one final instruction.

"And Tom ... tell them I was thinking about them at the last. Tell them that. Tell them I love them ... you must tell them that."

"I'm sure they don't need telling," said Tom quietly.

"Promise me you will tell them."

"I promise," whispered Tom.

"Good. I know you are a man of your word."

Seemingly content, Captain Percival's head fell slightly to one side, and he was gone. Tom wished he could muster a tear or at least register some sense of grief, but he could not. Numbness enveloped him like armour. So familiar had he become with death that he no longer railed against its intrusion even if he did fear its approach. He left the tent to the wounded and dying, their groans and screams ushering him on his way. Had the captain's death been in vain? Tom hoped not, but he couldn't be sure. But he was sure of one thing: there was nothing glorious about war.

Once outside, Tom reached into his pocket for his cigarettes and placed one between his lips. He was immediately joined by Sergeant Holmes.

"Allow me, sir," said the sergeant, striking a match and offering the flame to Tom.

Pitching his head towards the sergeant's cupped hands, Tom lit his cigarette, inhaled deeply and watched the wisps of smoke float away on the wind. Holmes extinguished the match before snapping it in half and discarding it.

"Just an old fishing superstition," explained the sergeant in response to the quizzical look on the young officer's face.

Tom's face brightened.

"Didn't know you were a fisherman, Bernard. Ever fished Derwentwater?" he asked expectantly.

"Many times, sir. Derwentwater is a favourite haunt of mine."

"I was brought up on that lake, caught my first fish there ..."

Stopping mid-sentence, Tom took another long pull on his cigarette. Derwentwater was another life away.

"Are you alright, sir?" asked the sergeant.

Tom stared at him for a few seconds.

"I'm fine," he replied.

"The men asked me to thank you, sir. They all know that if it hadn't been for you and the captain, most of us would never have got off that ridge."

Making a conscious effort to pull himself together, Tom dropped his cigarette to the floor and crushed it under his boot.

"Captain Percival was a good man," he said. "We shall all miss him."

For Tom and the men of the reinforced company, there was little relief from the fighting. By mid-November 1916, the battlefields of the Somme had turned into quagmires as the worst winter of the war took hold. The fighting slackened after that. Both physically and mentally, Tom was exhausted. In late December, his promotion to captain having been confirmed, he took the leave he was due. Returning to England, he went to Southampton where, making good on his promise, he called upon Captain Percival's parents and conveyed to them their son's final message. When they offered to put him up for the night, Tom politely refused. Mr and Mrs Percival's grief, though dignified, was overwhelming and he needed to escape: grief was not an emotion he could afford to indulge.

The following day, Tom met his family in London before attending the palace where he was presented with the Victoria Cross by a grateful monarch. It was a subdued Tom who accompanied his parents and Edward back to Keswick. Throughout Christmas,

friends and relatives visited Blackberry Hill, intent on pressing the hand of the returning hero who, single-handedly, had captured a German trench. When asked to recount his heroic deed, Tom repeatedly gave all credit to Captain Percival only to be chastised for his modesty. But Tom was not being modest. For reasons he refused to acknowledge or contemplate, he felt a sense of guilt for having survived, a guilt which was only partly assuaged by his belief that it was only a matter of time before he, too, joined the ranks of the 'glorious dead'.

Strangely, the calm of the Borrowdale Valley played on Tom's nerves. Sleep offered no respite sheltering as it did the ghosts of fallen comrades, their decaying and mutilated forms tearing at his being in an attempt to gather him into their ranks. His parents, afraid for him, hid their concerns behind ready smiles and assured him that he would soon be home for good. Brigit Cole was a good actress. How she wanted to wrap her boy in her arms. How she wanted to tell him he did not have to go back. How she wanted to throw away his uniform and shut the door on the world and its troubles. How she wanted to chase away the demons and tell her boy that it had all been a bad dream. But she could not. All she could offer was a brave face. Richard Cole, for his part, suffered with his conscience. He had, after all, been the one who had encouraged Tom to take a commission. How proud he had been of his son's willingness to fight for 'King and Country'. How sure he had been that Tom had done the right thing. How convinced he had been that the might of the British would secure victory within months. How ashamed he now was for having led his son to the altar of war. How he wished he could take his place.

*

Collecting his equipment, the photographer thanked one and all and promised to fulfil his commission within a week.

"And the best of British to you, sir," he said to Tom on his way out. "Give the Bosch hell. We'll all be rooting for you."

"Thank you. Do my best," replied Tom quietly.

By eleven o'clock, the family car was waiting to take Tom to the station.

"Surely you could stay for lunch, Tom?" protested Brigit.

"Sorry, Mother, no time. The army doesn't wait for lunch, I'm afraid."

"Now, Brigit, let the lad get off," said Richard in a game effort to effect an air of normality. "Come on, Tom, I'll get your bag."

"I'll take good care of it, Tom, promise," said Edward, holding up the Victoria Cross.

"Make sure you do," smiled Tom. "Right, time I was off."

Once outside, Tom took his bag from his father and shook his and Edward's hand. Having kissed his mother goodbye, he made his way down the steps to the waiting car where the driver took his bag and placed it in the vehicle. As he was about to get into the car, Tom hesitated. Remembering his conversation with the dying Captain Percival, he turned towards his family.

"You know I love you, don't you? I love you all," he said in a very matter-of-fact way.

Brigit Cole, her bright eyes brimming, moved instinctively towards her son but was restrained by the gentle hand of her husband.

"Of course we do," replied Richard, who, try as he might, could do nothing to repel the tremor invading his voice. "We have always known."

"Good," said Tom, who, without further comment, got into the car and returned to the war.

CHAPTER TWO

The Image of His Father

It was September 1966 and Grey Stones was preparing for the new academic year. From the open window of his first-floor study, Mr G.A. Snyder looked out upon the gravelled drive along which a procession of cars cautiously approached the school. Immediately below him, a throng of pupils, parents, staff and porters manhandled suitcases and trunks through the Victorian entrance hall en route to the dormitories enclosing the quad. Lifting his eyes from the drive, his expressionless stare morphed into a smile as his gaze settled on the Cumbrian countryside. Overlooked by the fells of the Borrowdale Valley, flanked by the Great Wood to the south, Keswick to the north, rolling farmland to the east and the shores of Derwentwater to the west, the school's glorious location offered much to smile about.

Tall with a slight stoop, elongated chin, prominent nose and bald dome, Mr Snyder looked the clichéd epitome of the public school headmaster, especially when wearing his gown. A testament to his vanity, Mr Snyder always wore his gown, even when meeting parents. He liked to impress, and his gown, he thought, made him look very impressive.

From the wall behind his desk, an oil painting of Mr Snyder, resplendent in his gown, dominated the study. Posing in front of the enormous oak doors of the Great Hall, the head exuded authority and poise: a lord on the steps of his manor. Etched into the weathered stone arch above the ancient doors, the motto *Fronti Nulla Fides* hung above Snyder's head like a halo. The joke was not lost on those who knew their Latin: the portrait, commissioned only two

years before, captured him with a full head of hair.

Turning from the window, Mr Snyder approached the large gilt-framed mirror above the fireplace on the opposite wall. Still smiling, he admired his reflection, straightened his tie, caressed the ever-shrinking crescent of hair that guarded his dome and readied himself for the charm offensive he was about to unleash upon Mr and Mrs Johnston. As headmaster, it was not his custom to greet new boarders in person unless their parents were particularly wealthy. When informed that the Johnstons were prominent in the oil business, Mr Snyder immediately singled them out for special attention. As he continued to stare into the mirror, he had every confidence that a healthy donation would soon be winging its way into the school's coffers.

At precisely ten o'clock, Miss Cropper, Mr Snyder's secretary, knocked on his door.

"Enter."

There was a distinct lilt in Mr Snyder's voice.

A portly lady in her mid-fifties, Miss Cropper crept into the room.

"Mr and Mrs Johnston and their son, James," she announced, her tone utterly subservient.

"Yes, of course," acknowledged Mr Snyder as he allowed himself one last peek in the mirror. "Show them in."

Miss Cropper held open the door and ushered the Johnstons into the room.

"Mr Johnston, what a pleasure," sang Mr Snyder as he advanced from the fireplace. "Welcome to Grey Stones."

"Hello, pleased to meet you," responded a cautious Mr Johnston as he clasped the head's hand and shook it firmly.

Tall and well-built, Mr Johnston had the look and sound of a self-made man. Momentarily taken aback by Mr Johnston's Liverpool accent, Mr Snyder paused before turning to Mrs Johnston.

"My dear lady, at last, we meet."

Mrs Johnston returned a confident smile before accepting the head's outstretched hand.

"Hello. What a lovely office," she said with an accent which confirmed that she, too, hailed from the banks of the Mersey.

The smile on Mr Snyder's face wavered as he motioned the Johnstons to the three chairs in front of his desk.

"Please, do sit down," he said, the lilt in his voice having disappeared.

A period of silence ensued as Mr Snyder fixed his gaze on James, who, seated between his parents, stared back and smiled. Mr Snyder emitted a quiet cough and took a few seconds to weigh up the new boarder. Fourteen years old, of average height and medium build, with black hair and blue eyes, the boy looked normal enough.

"So, this is James," said Mr Snyder brightly.

"Jimmy, we call him Jimmy," corrected Mrs Johnston.

"Jimmy?" repeated Mr Snyder quizzically.

"Yes, Jimmy," confirmed Mrs Johnston firmly. "He isn't called James, he's called Jimmy."

Silence again intervened as Mr Snyder struggled to accept the vulgar transition that had turned a James into a Jimmy. When he next spoke, it was as if he was talking to himself.

"I don't think we have ever had a *Jimmy* at Grey Stones."

Mrs Johnston changed the conversation.

"That's an impressive portrait," she said, looking at the painting on the wall. "Your father? There's a definite likeness."

Mr Snyder's eyes narrowed.

"My father?" he replied, his bafflement all too apparent.

"Well, he does look like you," said Mrs Johnston, completely unaware of the harm she was inflicting upon the head's ego.

The look of pained disbelief on the head's face encouraged Mr Johnston to interject.

"Now, come on, love, let's not forget the school motto."

"I'm sorry?" replied Mrs Johnston.

"The school motto," repeated Mr Johnston, forcing a smile. "*Fronti Nulla Fides* … 'don't judge a book by its cover' and all that."

"Yes, I know what the school motto is," confirmed Mrs Johnston a touch impatiently.

"Let's move on, shall we?" encouraged Mr Johnston. "I hope you don't mind, but we can't stay long as we have business to attend to."

Although this was true, it was also the case that Mr Johnston, for whom parting with his son was something of a wrench, did not like long goodbyes.

"Business?" queried Mr Snyder, his spirit soaring as he remembered the oil. "Yes, of course, you are in the oil business, I believe."

Mr Snyder's tone again exuded warmth.

"Yes, that's right," smiled Mrs Johnston. "We're expecting a tanker."

"A tanker," repeated Mr Snyder, his mind's eye picturing the heavily-laden ship en route from the Gulf.

"Yes, a tanker," confirmed Mr Johnston, "and we've got to get back to take delivery."

"I understand completely," sympathised Mr Snyder. "The life of an oil tycoon must be a very busy one."

"Well, I wouldn't say *tycoon* exactly," protested Mr Johnston mildly.

Convinced that a sizable donation to the school was in the bag, Mr Snyder beamed.

"And where is she bound?" he asked, embracing the terminology of the seafarer.

"She?" queried Mr Johnston with a glance towards his wife. "She's coming with me."

"No, no, my dear fellow," chuckled Mr Snyder. "I mean the tanker. For which port is it bound?"

"Southport," replied Mrs Johnston. "It's arriving at our petrol station in Southport at about four o'clock, and Frank has to be there to pay the driver."

"Petrol station?" repeated Mr Snyder, the colour flooding from his dome.

"That's right, a petrol station," confirmed Mr Johnston.

"Petrol station as in where motorists buy petrol?" asked Mr Snyder, with a hint of contempt that was not lost on Mrs Johnston.

"And other things," she replied sternly.

Mr Johnston rose to his feet and looked Mr Snyder in the eye.

"We've been in the business ten years now, started from nothing. We have five stations on the go and another in the pipeline. I hope you approve."

Mr Snyder, his eyes once again fixed on Jimmy, had stopped listening. He felt utterly deflated, cheated even. The Johnstons were 'trade'; they ran a petrol station. They didn't own an oil business. They were not wealthy. They wouldn't be pouring huge donations of cash into the school coffers. They were nothing more than gate-crashers, social climbers intent on rising above their station, their petrol station. But Mr Snyder's hands were tied. The first year's fees had been paid in full and the school was contractually bound to accept young Johnston into the fold. When he next addressed Mr and Mrs Johnston, his tone was flat.

"Well, I'm sure I need not keep you from attending to your business interests any longer," he said. "Suffice to say that you leave your son in very capable hands and I am sure he will settle in quickly. Do you have any questions?"

"I don't think so," said Mr Johnston.

"No, we're sure you will take very good care of our boy," said Mrs Johnston, whose eyes visibly softened.

"And what about James, I mean Jimmy?" asked Mr Snyder, who was now going through the motions. "Do you have any questions?"

"Yes," said Jimmy, who then paused for a moment. "What's your detention policy?"

"Jimmy," exclaimed Mrs Johnston as she elbowed her son in the ribs.

"Boys, eh!" chuckled Mr Johnston. "Don't worry about him; he's a good lad, he won't give you any trouble."

"Of that, I have no doubt," replied Mr Snyder dryly.

"You will be alright, won't you, Jimmy?" asked Mrs Johnston, her stare fixed fondly on the boy.

Jimmy smiled at her.

"I'll be fine, Mum."

"Well, if that's it, we'll be off," said Mr Johnston. "Now remember, son, if you need me for anything, anything at all, just give me a ring and I'll be here before you can say 'fill her up'."

Mr Snyder stifled a groan.

"Thanks, Dad," replied Jimmy.

Mr Snyder pressed a button on his desk and spoke into an intercom, his manner now brisk and commanding.

"Miss Cropper, Mr and Mrs Johnston are just leaving. Please show them out and send for a porter."

As the Johnstons made their way out of the room, Jimmy suddenly felt rather alone. When they reached the door, Mrs Johnston turned to face him.

"Come here, you," she ordered softly, her arms outstretched.

Crossing the floor, Jimmy walked into his mum's tight embrace. Unsure of what to say, Mr Johnston placed a gentle hand on his son's head.

"Be good; we're all very proud of you," whispered Mrs Johnston.

And with that, they were gone. As the study door closed, Jimmy turned to face Mr Snyder.

"Sit down, boy," ordered the head. "You are now a pupil of Grey Stones and you will act in the appropriate manner."

"Yes, sir," replied Jimmy, taking his seat.

"For as long as you are at this school, I shall be watching your every step," warned the head. "Do your best to fit in and stay out of trouble."

Before Jimmy could respond, there was a knock on the door and a porter entered the study. Tall, thick-set, aged about forty, Stanley Rimmer took off his black bowler hat and silently awaited his instructions.

"Ah, Rimmer," said Mr Snyder. "Allow me to introduce James Johnston, a new fourth-year boarder. Please escort him to his accommodation. Miss Cropper will tell you where."

"Certainly, sir," replied Rimmer gruffly. "Come with me, please."

Jimmy stood up from his chair and paused for a moment, thinking that he was to be lectured further, but Mr Snyder simply rose to his feet and turned his back on the boy. Realising that release was at hand, Jimmy followed Rimmer out of the study. As the door closed, the head looked up at his portrait, his hands once more caressing his bald dome, his injured pride illuminated by the grimace on his face.

"My father?" he muttered.

Mr Snyder pulled his gown around his shoulders, straightened his tie and returned to the window. His day could only get better.

CHAPTER THREE

New Friends

Having collected his suitcase from the main entrance, Jimmy followed Rimmer to the room that was to be his home for the academic year. Upon reaching their destination, Rimmer spoke for the first time since leaving Mr Snyder's office.

"Here we are, sir, this is you."

Jimmy, somewhat bemused at being addressed as 'sir', waited in silence as Rimmer rapped the door three times with his fist. Within seconds, the door was opened by a gangly youth wearing spectacles and sporting a recently inflicted 'short back and sides'. Upon seeing Rimmer, the boy smiled a polite smile that expressed a desire to please.

"Morning, sir," grunted Rimmer.

Jimmy was having trouble taking this 'sir' business in.

"Got a new roommate for you, you're expecting him, I believe," said Rimmer.

"Oh right, yes," replied the boy transferring his smile to Jimmy. "Come in."

Rimmer stepped aside and Jimmy manoeuvred his suitcase across the threshold.

"I'll be off then," said Rimmer.

As soon as Rimmer had gone, the boy closed the door and stared at Jimmy for a few seconds before thrusting out his right hand.

"Anthony Letts-Hyde, welcome to Grey Stones," grinned

Anthony as he enthusiastically shook Jimmy's hand.

Jimmy, who was not at all accustomed to such formal introductions, especially from boys his own age with double-barrelled surnames, responded in kind.

"Jimmy Johnston, pleased to meet you."

"You're from Liverpool, aren't you? I can tell from your accent," said Anthony.

Jimmy, who had no idea where Anthony came from on account that he had no accent at all, managed to retrieve his hand from his roommate's vice-like grip.

"That's right," he replied. "I'm from Aintree."

Situated on the ground floor of the northern dormitory, the room, like most of the student accommodation at Grey Stones, catered for three pupils. To Jimmy's left, wall cupboards overlooked a table and four chairs, beyond which was a bathroom. Directly ahead of him, a large window looked out onto the quad. Through an arch to his right, three beds, separated by single wardrobes and chests of draws, hugged the furthermost wall. Placing his suitcase on the unclaimed bed by the window, Jimmy thought about unpacking.

"Who else bunks here then?" he asked. "I thought there were supposed to be three of us?"

"Mark, Mark Peck," replied Anthony. "You'll like him. He's just nipped to the school shop. He'll be back any minute."

At that very instant, the door opened and a boy, his head bowed, entered the room. Dark-skinned, of average build and height, the boy briefly looked up at Jimmy before turning to close the door. There, he paused for some seconds, raising his hand to his face in an attempt to hide his closing right eye and bloodied nose. Taking a deep breath, he raised his head, attempted a smile and turned to welcome his new roommate.

"Hi, I'm Mark … Mark Peck."

Jimmy, distracted by the boy's injuries, did not respond.

"Not again … not already," complained Anthony moving towards his friend.

"Afraid so," replied Mark trying to muster a laugh. "Thought he might have forgotten about me over the summer."

"Not him," declared Anthony angrily. "Not Lunt. First day back and he's up to his old tricks. Sit down, and I'll get something for your face."

As Mark sat at the table, Anthony disappeared into the bathroom to fetch a damp towel.

"This is Jimmy, Jimmy Johnston," shouted Anthony from the bathroom.

"Hi," said Jimmy, who was still taking the situation in.

"Sorry about this, it being your first morning and all," replied Mark.

"Sorry!" exclaimed Anthony returning with the towel. "What have you got to be sorry about? It's that ignorant oversized oaf who should be sorry. Where did it happen this time?"

"Behind the science lab on the way to the shop. He saw me coming, him and his two friends."

"Who? Reilly and Woosey?" asked Anthony knowingly.

"Who else?" winced Mark as he applied the wet towel to his eye. "They said they were extremely pleased to see me, bundled me behind the lab, searched my pockets and took my money, a ten-bob note. Next thing, Lunt started punching me in the face."

"Didn't you hit him back?" asked Jimmy, who, given the silence that followed, was immediately sorry he had asked the question.

"Not my style, I'm afraid."

Mark's tone was almost apologetic.

"You don't take on the likes of Lunt, Reilly and Woosey," explained Anthony in defence of his friend. "They're animals. We're fourth-formers; they're fifth-formers. They're older and bigger than us ... two of them anyway … they do what they like and nobody seems to care."

"But why you, Mark?" asked Jimmy. "Why do they pick on you?"

Anthony jumped in before his friend could answer.

"Because his parents work abroad."

"Come off it," protested Mark, "you know that's not the real reason."

Anthony hesitated for a moment.

"Not that it would do any good telling parents."

"Why wouldn't it?" asked Jimmy.

"Simple," replied Anthony. "The Snide absolutely adores Lunt because his father donates masses of money to the school."

"The Snide?" queried Jimmy.

"Mr Snyder, the head," explained Mark.

"Oh, him," said Jimmy.

"So, if you do tell, nothing happens, and you get called a 'snitch', and when the time is right, Lunt and his friends take their revenge. Take my advice," warned Anthony, "stay out of Lunt's way."

Following lunch, Jimmy's roommates showed him around the school. Although there was every prospect that Mark might run into Lunt again, he would not be put off. Those they met who were curious about how Mark had sustained his injuries were told that he had fallen off his bike. Jimmy toed the party line.

"Anything you want to know about the school's history, just ask," said Anthony as the boys entered the magnificent library in Baird House.

Jimmy said nothing.

"Anything you want to know, anything at all, just ask," repeated Anthony.

"Right, okay," replied Jimmy looking about the library.

"Is there nothing you want to know?" asked Anthony a touch impatiently.

"I don't think so," replied Jimmy politely.

"Humour him," advised Mark, "and ask him something before he starts quoting Compton Hobbs."

Anthony's face visibly brightened at the mention of the name.

"Compton who?" asked Jimmy.

"Compton Hobbs. He wrote a book called *Mysteries of the Borrowdale Valley*," beamed Anthony. "There's a chapter in it about the lost treasure of Grey Stones."

"Lost treasure?" repeated Jimmy expectantly.

"Here we go," muttered Mark.

Before taking Jimmy into his confidence, Anthony looked around to ensure nobody was within earshot.

"According to Compton Hobbs, the school was built on the site of Derwent Abbey, a Cistercian monastery founded in the twelfth century. In 1537, during the Reformation, Henry VIII looted the abbey and burned most of it to the ground."

"Really?" said Jimmy diplomatically.

"Oh yes, that's a matter of record," confirmed Anthony with authority. "But Compton Hobbs reckons that the monks saved most of the abbey's treasure by smuggling it out through secret passages. When Henry's men found that virtually everything of value had disappeared, they tortured the monks for days on end."

"Then what happened?" asked Jimmy, his interest momentarily stirred.

"The monks refused to talk and were put to the sword," replied an animated Anthony. "It's said that their ghosts have roamed the grounds ever since in their blood-stained habits."

"Well, I've never seen them," said Mark stifling a yawn.

Ignoring Mark's apparent lack of interest, Anthony ploughed on.

"By 1539, according to Compton Hobbs, what was left of the abbey and its lands had been sold to Nicholas Farringdon, the fourth Earl of Borrowdale. He built a country mansion from the grey stone

that gives the school its name."

"You sound like a tourist guide," complained Mark shaking his head.

"No, no, that's really interesting," assured Jimmy, determined to keep the peace.

"Compton Hobbs says that by the1860s, most of the estate had been sold to pay off gambling debts. What was left was bought by Sir Malcolm Baird, who opened the school in 1870."

"And here we are," said Jimmy, thankful that Anthony's history lesson had ended. "Where to next?"

"Why don't we show Jimmy around Cole House before doing the rest of our unpacking?" suggested Anthony.

"If you like," replied a subdued Mark.

"Cole House it is then," beamed Anthony.

Leaving Baird House by its main entrance, the boys turned right along the gravelled drive and entered Cole House through the large foyer that graced the front of the building. Once inside, Jimmy stopped in front of a statue of a middle-aged man. An inscription cut into the plinth read:

Richard Cole

1862-1942

Filius est pars patris

"Who's he?" asked Jimmy.

"Richard Cole?" replied Mark, intent on stealing Anthony's thunder. "He was the father of Captain Thomas Howard Cole VC, who was killed in the Great War of 1914-18."

"Richard Cole built this place as a memorial to his son," said Anthony, keen to reassert his standing as guide-in-chief. "There's a photograph of the captain inside."

Passing through the foyer into the hall, Jimmy was struck by the cathedral-like hush that enveloped him. Two large chandeliers,

identical in every detail, bathed the hall's oak-panelled walls in a warm, golden glow. All around him, hundreds of photographs, chronologically displayed, served to introduce the incumbents of Grey Stones to the pupils and staff who had gone before them. Cricket teams, rugby teams, boxers, athletes and tennis players peered at Jimmy from every angle, their arms folded, their expressions aloof, all competing for the attention that might, if only for a moment, recognise their previous existence. As the pictorial history reached into the first decade of the twentieth century, Jimmy was struck by just how serious the subjects looked.

"Unhappy looking bunch, aren't they?" he commented. "Not a smile among them."

"Maybe they knew what was coming," said Anthony.

Shifting his gaze in the direction of Anthony's outstretched arm, Jimmy saw two large mahogany boards looking down at him from the far end of the hall. Like a team sheet posted before a cricket match, the names engraved upon the wooden tablets confirmed the identity of those selected to play and die for their country in two world wars.

"There must be seventy or eighty who died in the First World War alone," said Jimmy quietly.

By the 1920s, the former pupils of Grey Stones were staring confidently into the camera. By the 1930s, the black-and-white images exuded nonchalance, but by 1940 the younger masters had again taken their leave. By the 1950s, those captured on camera retaliated with smiles which, by the 1960s, were preserved in glorious colour. By then, everybody was smiling: girls had been allowed across the threshold, their presence liberating the hall from its masculine straightjacket.

Sandwiched between the mahogany tablets at the far end of the hall, a photograph of Captain Thomas Howard Cole, his Victoria Cross pinned to his chest, hung unaccompanied. Below the photograph, a bronze plate bore the following inscription:

Captain T. H. Cole of the King's Own Border Regiment

Born 28th May 1894

Died 21st March 1918

Filius est pars patris

Jimmy's face lit up for a moment.

"Hey, look! Me and the captain have the same birthday!"

"He's related to Robert Cole, you know," said Anthony, ignoring Jimmy's revelation.

"Robert who?" asked Jimmy.

"Robert Cole, our history master," replied Mark. "Captain Cole was his uncle."

"And Captain Edward Cole was his father," said Anthony, pointing to the mahogany board that commemorated the fallen of the Second World War.

"Captain Edward Robert Cole MC, Royal Engineers, died 18th March 1945 aged forty-four," recited Mark. "Two brothers, both killed in different wars."

"What's this?" asked Jimmy peering into the display cabinet beneath the captain's photograph.

Inside the cabinet, several pages of typed correspondence lay next to a creased brown envelope.

"That's a typed copy of the captain's last letter home," explained Anthony. "It's dated 20th March 1918. I suppose the family has the original."

"Can we go now?" asked Mark.

"Yes, come on," said Anthony. "We'd better finish unpacking."

"You two go," said Jimmy. "I'll be along in a minute."

Slightly taken aback by Jimmy's interest in the captain, Mark and Anthony exchanged looks before leaving the hall. Left alone, Jimmy read the letter carefully, fascinated that it had been written in the

trenches the day before the captain's death. Before leaving the hall, he paused and looked again at the photograph, aware that he had made some connection with the soldier who had died forty-eight years before.

That evening, sitting around the table in their room, Mark and Anthony warned Jimmy about the teachers he would encounter at Grey Stones, especially those they deemed exceptionally strict, exceptionally weird and exceptionally stupid. That their favourite subject was history was perhaps explained by the fact that it was taught by their favourite teacher, Robert Cole.

"So where do you come from, Anthony?" asked Jimmy as the evening wore on.

"I'm from Oxford," replied Anthony.

"What do your mum and dad do?" Jimmy asked.

"They're dentists," replied Anthony baring his teeth in a wide grin. "Can't you tell?"

"Anthony prides himself on his teeth; they glow in the dark," said Mark.

"Best set of choppers in Grey Stones," bragged Anthony.

"Grey Stones is a long way from Oxford; couldn't you find a school closer to home?" asked Jimmy.

"I wanted to come here," explained Anthony. "My father was raised in Keswick and my grandmother, Granny Hyde, still lives here. We go and see her sometimes, don't we, Mark? You can come with us next time if you like."

"And what about you, Mark?" asked Jimmy moving the conversation on. "Where are you from?"

"Me? I'm from Lancaster," replied Mark.

"And what do your parents do?"

The question drew a subdued response.

"Oh, they work abroad," Mark replied quietly. "My mum and dad

are teachers. My dad, well, my dad is also a vicar; he and mum teach in a missionary in Kenya."

"Sounds great," said Jimmy, immediately aware that he had touched a nerve.

"Not that great," muttered Mark. "Haven't seen them for nearly a year."

"I've got lemonade and chocolate in the cupboard," enthused Anthony in a noble attempt to distract his friend. "Who wants some?"

"I'll have some," said Jimmy brightly.

"Not for me, thanks," said Mark. "I'm supposed to be in training."

"Training? Training for what?" asked Jimmy.

"The 'Christmas Chase', that's what," replied Anthony. "The school holds a cross-country run on the last Wednesday before the Christmas break. Never, not in the school's entire history, has the race ever been won by a fourth former. Not until this year, that is."

"What? Do you mean that …?"

Anthony never gave Jimmy a chance to finish his question.

"Mark is the best runner the fourth form has ever produced, and this is going to be his year."

"Take no notice of Anthony; he tends to exaggerate," advised Mark shaking his head.

"Do you think you have a chance?" asked Jimmy.

Mark hesitated before answering.

"If I train hard between now and Christmas, I might have a chance, but only a small one. I'll be up against a strong field."

It was becoming clear to Jimmy that Mark took the race very seriously.

"He's going to walk it, believe me," said Anthony.

Appreciative of Anthony's somewhat obvious attempt to restore his good humour, Mark looked up and smiled.

That night, as he lay in bed, Jimmy contemplated the day's events, confident that he had formed a bond with his roommates. During the early hours of the morning, he was awoken by the sound of gentle sobbing coming from Mark's bed. Aware that any intrusion would only embarrass his new friend, Jimmy turned on his side and waited for the sobbing to subside. Only then did he drift back off to sleep.