

Chapter 1

Get me out!

Yorkshire, England, July 1936

Freddie closed the metal gate and shut his eyes tight. The elevator began its high-speed journey underground. It took seven seconds to reach the bottom.

“One, two, three . . .” Freddie counted. The elevator shook as it came to a stop. But Freddie had only got to five. He opened his eyes. He saw only black walls. He started to panic. His body began to sweat and shake. His mouth was dry.

“Hey!” he shouted into the blackness. “The elevator’s stuck. Get me out!”

A few more seconds passed.

Suddenly the elevator shook again and down it went.

At the bottom, Freddie pushed open the door and fell out into the heat and dust of the mine.

“Look who it is stuck in the elevator!” laughed a voice, “Freddie Fox!”



The voice belonged to Ralph. Ralph was the same age as Freddie, and they had been in the same class at school.

"Were you scared, Freddie? You're worse than my little sister," Ralph added.

Freddie breathed deeply. "I'm looking for the boss," he said. "I've got a message for him."

"That way," said Ralph, pointing down one of the tunnels. Freddie ran off, his face burning in shame.

SPAIN: CIVIL WAR BREAKS OUT

Hitler Sends Planes to Help Franco

When Freddie got home from work, his father was putting coal into the fire in the tiny kitchen. Supper was cooking on top, and the air in the room was hot and thick. Freddie made some tea. Freddie's dad sat on a low chair next to the fire, his back bent. Freddie stared out of the window. They didn't speak.

Freddie took his tea through to the living room. His mother sat at the table, writing.

"How was work?" she asked.

"The same as usual," said Freddie. He took a newspaper out of his pocket and handed it to her.

"Oh, thanks," she said. "What's happening in the world today? '*German planes arrived in Morocco yesterday,*'" she read aloud, "*to transport soldiers from Spanish bases in north Africa across to mainland Spain this week. Mr. Hitler has promised to help the Spanish Army of Africa -*"

"Do you think there's going to be a war here in England?" asked Freddie.

"Yes, I'm afraid there is. The war could easily spread to other countries, especially now that Germany is getting involved," said his mother. "What a terrible thought!"

"Maybe I should go to Spain," said Freddie. "It says in the paper that people are volunteering from all over the world –"

"Men, not boys," said Freddie's father, coming into the room. "You need to stay here and help put food on this table."

Freddie's mom went to get the dinner. She called Freddie's brothers and sister, and the family squeezed around the table. There was barely room to lift their knives and forks.

"If I was Freddie, I'd go to Spain," said his mom.

"Don't encourage him," said his father.

"I don't have to fight," said Freddie. "I could work for a newspaper and send money home."

"You could write reports from the front line. And Freddie and I have been learning Spanish," said his mom. "I'd definitely go if I had the chance."

"Not that writing nonsense again," said Freddie's dad. "You should get down that mine and earn a proper day's money."

"You know he can't go down the mine," said his mom.

"How can he go to war then?" said his dad. "I know what war's like. It's no place for a soft boy like Freddie. Now let me eat my dinner in peace."

After dinner, Freddie walked up the hill overlooking the mining town of Middleton. The heat of the day hung in the evening air. Some others who worked down the mine were there. They kicked a ball around for a while and then played cards.

Even though everyone washed after work, they still looked dirty. Lines of coal dust ringed their faces. It was a mining town, and for the young men there was only one path. When you left school, you took a job underground, just like your father. Except Freddie, who worked above ground. His face was clean.

Freddie had been a bit of a joke at school. He didn't like playing tricks on the teacher or fighting in the playground. When the teams were chosen for a game of soccer, Freddie was always picked last.

When they all left school, he'd gone to work down the mine with the rest of them. But his problems started on the first day. His body started to panic as soon as he stepped into the elevator. He was always sweating and shaking by the time it arrived. The first few times, his father shouted at him and his friends laughed. But that didn't help, and the sweating and shaking got worse. So he was given a job in the office. He was smart, after all, and he was good at writing letters. Most days, however, he still had to take messages down into the mine, which he hated.

The young men lay around on the grass with nothing to do. Ralph was there. He told the others about Freddie getting stuck in the elevator. "Typical Freddie," they said.

Freddie tried to change the subject. "Looks like there's a war starting in Spain," he said.

"Spain?" said Ralph. "Where's Spain?"

"It's next to France," said Freddie.

Ralph rolled onto his elbows and looked at Freddie.

"I know where Spain is, you fool," said Ralph. "But I don't care, see?"

"Maybe we should go and fight, that's all," said Freddie.

"I can just see you in the army, Freddie," said one of the others. "You'll have your hands in the air before the enemy's got his gun out."

They all laughed.

"Why would we fight someone else's war, anyway?" said Ralph. "If it's fighting you want, you can fight me."

Freddie looked over the town toward the horizon.

"I fancy that sister of yours," said Ralph to Freddie, after a while. The others laughed and whistled.

"You keep your hands off my sister," said Freddie.

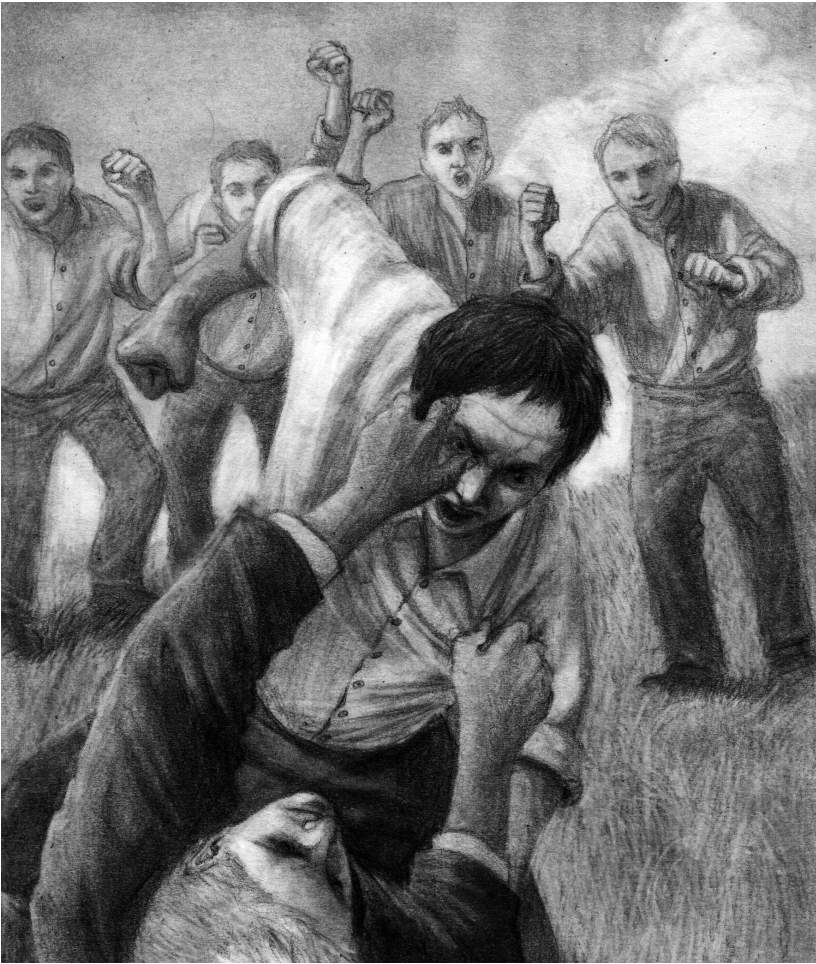
"Ooh! I'm scared," said Ralph. The others laughed.

Freddie threw himself at Ralph, and they rolled down the slope, hitting out with their fists. "Fight! Fight!" shouted the others,

jumping up and circling around. Within seconds, Ralph was holding Freddie down on the hard ground. He raised his fist, ready to punch.

“Leave it, Ralph,” said one of the others. “Let him go.”

Ralph slowly got off Freddie, his arm still raised. Freddie got to his feet and walked down toward the railway line. He couldn't hear the laughter anymore, but he could still feel it.



* * *

The next day, Freddie had to take the safety report book down into the mine. The elevator traveled smoothly this time, and Freddie ran along the tunnel, looking for Mr. Taylor, the boss. He passed two miners on their way to the elevator.

"Any sign of the boss?" he called.

"He's further along the tunnel," one of them shouted back, "where the new tunnel starts."

Freddie didn't usually go this far into the mine. Sweat was running down his face, and his heart was beating fast.

Mr. Taylor was looking up at the roof in the new tunnel when Freddie found him. There was a miner with him – Ralph! Freddie handed over the report book.

"Freddie! Two visits in two days! You'll be wanting a job down here next!" joked Ralph.

But then Ralph stopped laughing. There was a cracking noise above their heads. They all looked up. Suddenly a cloud of dust burst from the roof of the tunnel.

"Run!" shouted Ralph. Freddie and Ralph ran back into the old tunnel. Big rocks crashed down behind them in the new tunnel. They heard Mr. Taylor scream. Dust filled the tunnel. They couldn't see. Freddie stopped and felt the panic rising through his body. The boss screamed again.

"Come on," cried Ralph. "Run!"

"Wh-What about the boss?" shouted Freddie.

"Leave him," said Ralph.

"No, we can't," said Freddie. For a second, Freddie just stood where he was. It felt like an hour. His body wanted to run, but he couldn't leave the boss. He went blindly back into the new tunnel and found the boss lying on the floor.

"Mr. Taylor?" he shouted. "Are you alive?"

"Freddie," groaned the boss. "H-Help me. Don't leave me . . . my leg . . ."

"You'll be OK. We'll get you out," Freddie said, not believing

his own words. The dust was clearing now, and he could see that the boss's leg was trapped under a rock. He tried to pull him out.

"Ralph!" he called. "Help me. We've got to move this rock." Ralph was close behind him.

"I'm not waiting," said Ralph. "I'm getting out of here."

Just at that moment, there was another dreadful crack and a new fall of rock. This time it was on the other side of them, in the old tunnel. Dust blinded them again.

"No!" screamed Ralph. "Freddie, you fool. We're trapped. Now we'll never get out." His voice rose in terror. He felt his way to the new rock fall and began to pull wildly at the lumps of rock.

Freddie took short breaths. He crawled into the old tunnel and away from the rock fall, deeper into the mine where there was more air. He sat with his back to the wall. He shut his eyes and counted, trying to breathe air into his lungs.

They could see light at the top of the rock fall. Freddie went back to the boss.

"Mr. Taylor?" he said.

"Freddie, help me," groaned Mr. Taylor.

"Leave him," cried Ralph. "Help! Help!"

Freddie ignored Ralph and tried to free the boss's leg. Mr. Taylor carried a hammer on his belt, and Freddie used it to break up the lumps of rock that were holding his foot. Freddie worked patiently. Concentrating on the task helped him forget his fear. After a while, he was able to loosen the boss's thick boot and gently pull his foot out.

"Give me a hand, Ralph," Freddie called. "He's free. Help me move him."

Ralph wasn't listening. "We're going to die," he was saying over and over again.

Freddie took hold of the boss under his arms and dragged him into the old tunnel. He laid him down carefully.

Ralph turned on Freddie. "This is your fault," he said. "If we'd run when I said, we'd be out of here. Why did you go back for him? He'll probably die anyway."

"Shut up, Ralph, he'll hear you," said Freddie.

"Freddie . . ." whispered Mr. Taylor. "Thank you . . . I'll never forget this." And then his head fell to the side. Freddie put his cheek to the man's mouth.

"He's still breathing," said Freddie. "But I think he's unconscious."

"Who cares?" said Ralph. "We're all going to die now anyway."

"Ssh! Listen," said Freddie. "Someone's calling."

"Hello," came a voice from the other side of the fall.

"We're here," screamed Ralph. "Get us out!"

* * *

Some hours later, Ralph and Freddie stepped out of the elevator into the daylight. Their parents and their friends were all there. The rescuers carried Mr. Taylor out. A reporter from the local newspaper stepped forward and spoke to Freddie.

"Congratulations," he said. "You saved your boss's life. Tell us what happened." Ralph pushed in front of Freddie and smiled.

"We're lucky to be alive," he said. "Just after I got the boss clear of the new tunnel, more of the roof came down. The boss and I would have been killed. Freddie just wanted to get out, but I couldn't leave another man, a miner, to die."

A great cheer went up.

"Good man, Ralph!" someone shouted.

"But – ow!" said Freddie.

Ralph had his hand around Freddie's arm and he squeezed it hard.

"That's the way it was, right?" Ralph whispered in Freddie's ear, a twisted smile on his face.

Freddie tried to stand up for himself.

"Ralph, you know that's not what happened –" he started to say, but nobody was listening. And who would believe him anyway?

The miners lifted Ralph onto their shoulders and carried him off down the street. Everyone ran after them, shouting and clapping.

Freddie turned away. His mother and father were standing there, looking at him.

Freddie saw that his father was ashamed.

"Dad!" said Freddie. "It wasn't like Ralph said . . ." But his dad had already turned away.

"It wasn't like that, Mum," said Freddie. "Ralph wanted to leave the boss, not me."

"I believe you, Freddie," she said and hugged her son.

"But Dad doesn't believe me," said Freddie, "and no one else will."

* * *

The next day at work, nobody spoke to Freddie. The office workers and the miners all ignored him. When he went into the local shop after work, everyone stopped speaking. Even his family were cold, apart from his mother.

After supper, he sat on his bed and looked at the newspaper. Ralph's face stared at him from the front page. "*Hero Saves Mine Boss*," it said. "*Mr. Taylor is in a coma . . . he may remain unconscious for some time*," Freddie read, "*but doctors say he will live*." Freddie opened the paper and read about the war in Spain. He tried to imagine what it was like, how different it was from this cold, dark mining town where everything was covered in dust and everyone thought he was a coward. Suddenly his future was clear. He would go to Spain and fight General Franco and the fascists². Nobody would know anything about him there. He would start again.

He packed a few things into a backpack. He laid out his work suit and his Sunday shoes. Then he climbed into bed and stared at the coal-black ceiling.

At dawn the next morning, Freddie waited by the railway line. The morning coal train was in Middleton station, about to start its journey to London. Freddie was hiding on the bank behind some bushes, out of sight of the train driver.

He heard the engine building up power. The wheels started to turn, and the train moved slowly out of the station.

“Now or never,” said Freddie.

Freddie ran down the bank and jumped onto the side of the last carriage. He hung on tight and climbed inside.

The train was picking up speed now. Around the corner it passed under a footbridge. Someone was there, waving. It was his mother! Freddie waved back wildly.

“I’ll write,” he shouted, and laughed out loud.