CHAPTER ONE

As a baby, Marc Kilgour had been abandoned between two stone flower pots on the platform at Beauvais station, sixty kilometres north of Paris. A porter found him lying inside a wooden fruit box and rushed him into the warmth of the stationmaster's office. There he discovered the only clue to the boy's identity – a scrap of notepaper with four handwritten words: *Allergic to cows' milk.*

Now twelve years old, Marc had imagined his abandonment so often that his memory of it seemed real: the frosty platform, his anxious mother kissing his cheek before boarding a train and disappearing for ever, her eyes moist and her head crammed with secrets as the

carriages steamed into the night. In his fantasies Marc saw a statue being erected on the platform some day. Marc Kilgour: fighter ace, Le Mans race winner, hero of France . . .

But his life so far could hardly have been less exciting. He'd grown up in a decrepit farmhouse a few kilometres north of Beauvais, its cracked walls and shrivelled beams constantly threatened by the destructive power of a hundred orphan boys.

The region's farms, chateaux and forests were attractive to Parisians who came out for a Sunday drive; but it was hell to Marc, and the windows into more exciting lives he got through the radio and magazines tormented him.

His days were all the same: the squirming mass of orphans rising to the crack of a walking stick on a metal radiator, school until lunchtime, then an afternoon toiling on a nearby farm. It was brutal work, but the men who were supposed to do it had been called up to fight the Germans.

Morel's farm was the largest in the area and Marc was the youngest of four boys who worked there. Mr Tomas, the orphanage director, took advantage of the shortage of labour and received a good price for the boys' work; but the lads saw none of the money and any suggestion that they should was met with a stern expression and a

lecture on how much each of them had already cost in food and clothing.

A long history of run-ins with Director Tomas had earned Marc the least pleasant job on the farm. Most of Morel's land produced wheat and vegetables, but the farmer kept a dozen dairy cows in a shed whilst their calves were raised for veal under an adjacent canopy. Morel had no land for pasture, so his cattle lived on fodder and only glimpsed daylight when they were led to a neighbouring farm for a romp with Henri the bull.

While his fellow orphans tended fields, Marc clambered amidst the tightly packed stalls, scrubbing out the milking shed. An adult cow produces a hundred and twenty litres of faeces and urine each day and takes no account of holidays or weekends.

Seven days a week, Marc found himself in the vile-smelling shed, scraping manure down a sloped floor into the slurry pit. When the trampled straw and muck was cleared, he had to hose the concrete and replenish each stall with bales of hay and vegetable waste. Twice a week came the worst job of all: shovelling out the slurry pit and wheeling the stinking barrels to a barn, where they would rot down before being used as fertiliser.

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Jae Morel was also twelve and had known Marc since their first day at school. Marc was a handsome boy, with

tangled blond hair, and Jae had always liked him. But as the daughter of the area's wealthiest farmer she wasn't expected to mix with boys who came to school with bare feet. At age nine she'd moved from the village school to an all girls' academy in Beauvais and had almost forgotten Marc; until he'd begun working on her father's farm a few months earlier.

At first the pair only nodded and smiled, but since the weather had turned fine they'd managed a few conversations while sitting together in the grass, and occasionally Jae would share a bar of chocolate. They both sought a deeper connection, but their talk centred on local gossip and reminiscences from the days when they'd shared a classroom.

Jae always approached the cow shed as if she was taking a stroll and couldn't care less, but she often doubled back or hid in the long grass before standing up and pretending to bump into Marc by accident as he came outside. The process was strangely exciting, even though they'd never exchanged more than words and chocolate.

On this particular Wednesday, Jae was surprised to see Marc emerge from the side door of the cow shed, bare-chested and in a vile temper. He lashed out with his rubber boot, sending a metal bucket clattering across the farmyard before he grabbed another and put it under the tap mounted on the shed's exterior.

Intrigued by Marc's fury, Jae hunkered down and leaned against the trunk of an elm. She watched as Marc wriggled out of his filthy boots then glanced around furtively before removing his under-shorts, trousers and the socks into which they were tucked. Jae had never seen a boy naked and clapped a hand over her mouth as Marc stepped up on to a large paving slab and grabbed a block of soap.

Marc cupped his hands and dipped them into the bucket, splashing water on himself before working the soap. The water was cold and even though the sun was hot he moved hurriedly. When he was lathered all over, he raised the bucket high into the air and drained the water over his head.

Soap burned his eyes as he reached out for a grotty towel wrapped over a wooden post.

'You've got a big arse!' Jae shouted, as she sprang out of the grass.

Marc urgently flicked the damp hair off his face and was stunned to see Jae's brown eyes and sweet smile. He dropped the towel and lunged towards a pair of corduroy trousers.

'Jesus,' he choked, as the usually simple task of stepping into trousers became a frantic bout of hopping. 'How long have you been there?'

'Long enough.' Jae grinned, pointing at a wooden

screen lying flat on the pathway.

'I don't usually bother pulling it up . . . You're never around until later.'

'No school,' Jae explained. 'Some of the teachers have left. The Boche[1] are on the march . . .'

Marc nodded as he buttoned his trousers and lobbed his work boots into the shed. 'Did you hear the artillery shells earlier?'

'Made me jump,' Jae replied. 'And the German planes! One of our maids said there were fires in town, near the marketplace.'

'You can smell burning when the wind changes . . . Your dad's got that swanky Renault. You should head south.'

Jae shook her head. 'My mother wants to leave, but Daddy reckons the Germans won't bother us if we don't bother them. He says they'll still need farmers, whether it's French or German crooks running the country.'

'The director let us listen to the radio for a while last night,' Marc said. 'They said we're planning a counterattack. We could drive the Boche out.'

'Maybe,' Jae said uncertainly. 'But it doesn't look good . . .'

Marc didn't need Jae to explain further. The

[1] Boche – offensive term for German people.

government radio stations bristled with optimistic talk about fighting back and broadcast stirring speeches on *turning points* and the *French fighting spirit*. But no amount of propaganda could disguise truckloads of injured troops retreating from the front.

'It's too depressing,' Marc said, buttoning his shirt as he smiled at Jae. 'I wish I was old enough to fight. Have you heard anything from your brothers?'

'Nothing . . . But nobody knows about anyone. The post has gone to hell. They're probably being held prisoner. Or they might have escaped at Dunkirk.'

Marc nodded optimistically. 'BBC France said over a hundred thousand of our troops made it across the channel with the Brits.'

'So why were you in such a mood?' Jae asked.

'When?'

'Just now,' she smirked. 'When you steamed out of the shed and kicked the bucket.'

'Oh, *that*. I was all set to finish when I realised I'd left my shovel in one of the pens. So I reached in to grab it, the cow's tail shoots up and VOOM. It shits right in my face – mouth was open too . . .'

'EWW!' Jae shrieked, stepping back in horror. 'I don't know how you work in there! Just the smell makes me gag, and if *that* went in my mouth I'd die.'

'Get used to anything, I guess. And your dad's all right

in some ways. He knows it's a filthy job, so I only have to work half as long as the boys in the fields and he gave me boots and some of your brothers' old clothes. They're too big, but at least I don't have to go around stinking of slurry.'

After the initial shock Jae saw the funny side and she re-enacted the scene, flicking her arm up like the cow's tail and making a noise. 'VOOM – SPLAT!'

Marc was irked. 'It's not funny. I've still got the taste in my mouth.'

But this only made Jae laugh harder and Marc got annoyed.

'Little rich girl,' he sniped. '*You* wouldn't like it. You'd be crying your eyes out.'

'VOOM – SPLAT!' Jae repeated. She'd made herself laugh so hard that her legs were buckling.

'I'll show you what it's like,' Marc said, lunging forwards and wrapping his arms around her back.

'*No*,' Jae protested, kicking out as he hitched her off the ground. She was impressed by his strength, but she pounded bony fists against his back as he marched towards the open slurry pit at the end of the barn.

'I'll tell my dad!' she squealed. 'You'll be in so much trouble.'

'VOOM – SPLAT!' Marc replied, as he swung Jae forwards so that her long hair dangled precariously over

the foul-smelling pit. The stench had the physical presence of a slap. 'Do you fancy a swim?'

'Put me down,' Jae demanded, her stomach churning as she looked at the flies on the bubbling crust of manure. 'You oaf. If I get one speck of that on me you'll be *so* dead.'

Jae was starting to wriggle and Marc realised he didn't have the strength to hold her for much longer, so he swung her around and planted her back on the ground.

'Idiot,' she hissed, holding her stomach and retching.

'But it seemed so funny when it happened to *me*,' Marc said.

'Pig head,' Jae growled, as she swept her hair back into place.

'Maybe the princess should go back to her big house and practise her Mozart,' Marc teased, before making a screeching noise like a badly played violin.

Jae was spitting mad, not so much because of what Marc had just done, but because she'd let herself get so fond of him.

'Mother always told me to stay away from your type,' Jae said, squinting fiercely into the sunlight at him. 'Orphans! Look at you, you've just washed but even your clean clothes are filthy rags.'

'Temper, temper,' Marc grinned.

'Marc Kilgour, no wonder you work with manure. You *are* manure.'

Marc was anxious that Jae calm down. She was making a tonne of noise, and Farmer Morel prized his only daughter.

'Take it easy,' Marc begged. 'Us lads muck around, you know? I'm sorry. I'm not used to girls.'

Jae charged forwards and tried to slap Marc across the face, but he dodged out of the way. She swung around to catch him across the back of the head, but her canvas plimsoll skidded on the dry earth and she found herself doing the splits.

Marc reached around to save Jae as her front foot slid forwards, but her smock slipped through his fingers and he could only watch as she toppled into the pit.