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CHAPTER ONE

THE TWO PEOPLE ELLIE MCKELVEY hated most were Adolf Hitler and Victoria Gandeck. Hitler lived in Germany, but Victoria was just across the alley. And right now, Ellie hated Victoria more.

After all, it was Victoria's fault.

Ellie had been minding her own beeswax, thinking about the arithmetic homework she needed to do before the end of lunch hour. Then, as she crossed the schoolyard, sucking peanut butter from her teeth, Victoria yelled that horrible word. "Slacker! Ellie's brother is a yellow-bellied slacker!"

The next thing Ellie knew, she was sitting outside the principal's office with bruised knuckles and the metallic taste of blood in her mouth. Victoria was sprawled in the chair beside her, a bloody hanky to her nose, outstretched legs taking up half the room.

She's going to have a shiner, Ellie thought with satisfaction. But then I probably will too. She rubbed her sore scalp. Victoria had jerked her to the ground by her braids. She wondered if this was what getting scalped felt like.

Dust swirled in the sunbeams streaming through the office windows. It was a blue-sky-good-things-will-happen kind of day, more summer than September. TODAY IS FRIDAY, SEPTEMBER 10, 1943, said the Pittsburgh School Supplies calendar next to the window. Too nice a day to be in trouble.

B-r-r-r-i-n-n-n-g. The bell ending lunch hour.

Trampety tramp tramp tramp. Four hundred pairs of feet marched in line, down the hall, past the open door of the office. When the line paused for a minute, two little girls giggled, pointing at Ellie and Victoria.

"You're in trouble, you're in trouble," one girl sing-songed.

"I didn't know big girls got sent to the principal's office," said the other. Ellie threw them a dirty look. Ellie McKelvey *didn't* get sent to the principal's office.

Until today.

Ellie swung her feet back and forth, wishing the principal would hurry up. And then again, hoping she wouldn't. Who knew what happened in the principal's office? Everyone who had been there said it looked like a dungeon.

"Hey, you kicked my chair," said Victoria, voice muffled by the hanky over her nose.

"Did not," said Ellie.

"Did too. Keep your dumb old feet to yourself." She elbowed Ellie.

"Cut that out." Ellie gave her an elbow back.

"Aw, your mother wears army boots," sneered Victoria. "And your brother don't."

Ellie jumped up, fists clenched. "You take that back." *Ouch!* She glanced down to see playground cinders sticking to her bloody knees.

"Oh yeah? Says who?" Victoria's knees were bloody, too.

"Says me!"

"Oh yeah?" Victoria sprang out of her chair, dropping the hanky and grabbing a fistful of Ellie's blouse. Victoria's brown eyes narrowed with meanness.

Thwack. Thwack. Thwack. Victoria's other hand froze in mid-air. Behind the frosted glass door labelled MISS DEETCH, PRINCIPAL, somebody had just gotten three licks with the principal's special paddle. A bed slat, Ellie had heard, drilled with holes for greater stinging power.

Again, *thwack, thwack, thwack.* Then footsteps crossing the floor. Victoria let go of Ellie's blouse just as the door creaked open. Two boys slunk out, rubbing their backsides.

"Girls!" The principal's voice seemed to come from far away. "Into my office, please."

Ellie and Victoria slouched past Miss Deetch, into the dungeon.

Doomed, thought Ellie as the door clicked shut. At least we won't get paddled. Only boys got The Paddle. But then girls didn't get sent to the office, either. Especially not sixth-grade ones.

Miss Deetch seated herself at a desk the size of a battleship. Sunlight caught something sparkly on her dress lapel. A rhinestone eagle, with an American flag in its beak. Ellie had seen Miss Deetch every weekday since kindergarten: in the schoolyard, in assembly, standing in the front hall at dismissal. In all those years, she had never seen her wear any kind of jewellery, let alone something as big and gaudy as this pin.

The principal did not ask the girls to sit. Trying not to stare at the flashing red, white and blue rhinestones on Miss Deetch's chest, Ellie focused on the rug beneath her saddle shoes. Under the cool and tidy demeanour of the woman across the desk, she felt rumpled and sweaty. Miss Deetch, she was quite sure, never sweated.

"Well, girls, this is not an auspicious beginning to the

school year. What do you have to say for yourselves?" Without waiting for an answer, Miss Deetch forged on. "Girls fighting on the playground! And sixth graders at that! It's disgraceful – certainly not what I expect from young ladies."

Miss Deetch seemed to be talking to the air over their heads, so Ellie felt safe to look around. No whips. No shackles. No thumbscrews. The office smelled like mothballs and dusty books.

"...McKelveys and Gandecks have gone to school here for generations..."

Ellie wished that Miss Deetch would just get to the point and tell them their punishment.

"...never a moment's trouble. Good, conscientious students..."

Ellie shifted her weight from one foot to the other, and hoped she was missing arithmetic. She glanced up. Now Miss Deetch was talking to her hands, steepled before her on the desk.

"...and you, Victoria. Four brothers in the service..."

Victoria sighed, and Ellie felt a flash of sympathy. She could tell Victoria didn't like being compared to her brothers any more than Ellie liked being compared to her sister, Sal, and Jimmy. Then she remembered – Victoria was her enemy.

"Now to the facts of the matter," Miss Deetch said, looking at the girls. "Who started this?"

"She did!" both girls shouted, pointing to each other.

"Moderate voices, please. And one at a time. Victoria?"

"She hit me first. Punched me right in the nose."

"Eleanor?" Miss Deetch raised her eyebrows. "Is this true?"

"Yes, ma'am. But she called my brother Jimmy a slacker."

"Well he *is* a slacker!" huffed Victoria. "I don't see a uniform on him."

"He has a deferment." To Miss Deetch, Ellie explained, "On account of Pop breaking his leg last winter, so he couldn't walk his mail route. Jimmy was the only one working at our house, so he couldn't get drafted. He's no slacker."

"Your pop's been back at work for months," said Victoria. "Jimmy's a slacker, all right. And me with four brothers in the service. Frankie and Buddy and Hal and George. Buddy and Hal are in the Pacific and George is—"

"That is enough, Victoria," said Miss Deetch. Ellie snickered to herself. Once Victoria got going on her glorious brothers, all Marines, there was no shutting her up.

Miss Deetch peered over the top of her spectacles. "Let President Roosevelt and the War Department worry about Eleanor's brother."

"But she *hit* me," Victoria whined. "First."

"Yes, and it looks like *she* got the worst of it." Miss

Deetch's thin lips twitched in an almost-smile. "Victoria, you were wrong to say such a thing."

Ellie shot a so-there look at Victoria. Victoria scowled.

"But Eleanor, you were equally wrong in striking her. 'A soft answer turneth away wrath,' it says in the Bible. And you, Victoria." Miss Deetch levelled a look her way. "The Bible also says that you should turn the other cheek."

"Yes, ma'am, but then my other cheek would've gotten smacked, too," Victoria protested.

"Victoria Gandeck!" roared Miss Deetch. "Holy Scripture is not to be made light of."

"Yes, ma'am." Victoria bowed her head. You don't fool me, thought Ellie.

Miss Deetch rose from her chair. "Girls, shake hands and apologize."

"Is that all?" Victoria blurted out. "Ma'am," she added hastily.

Miss Deetch twitched her almost-smile again.

"There's enough fighting in the world. We must think before we strike." The principal fingered the eagle brooch. "You are two of a kind, Eleanor and Victoria."

"What?" said both girls, forgetting to use their moderate voices.

This time Miss Deetch actually smiled. "What I mean is that you are both proud of your brothers."

"Humph," grunted Victoria. "She can keep her old slack ...brother. *My* brothers are heroes."

"And my brother is right here, not off in some jungle fighting the Japanese," said Ellie.

Miss Deetch sighed. "I would say you two should avoid each other, but you are neighbours," she said.

"Yes, ma'am," Ellie volunteered. "Across-the-alley neighbours." She twiddled her skirt hem, and noticed it was torn.

"Then shake hands, and apologize," said the principal, coming from behind her desk.

The girls touched hands quickly and mumbled, "Sorry."

"Very good," said Miss Deetch. "Now go to the washroom and clean up before you go back to class. We don't want to give Miss Granberry a fright."

Victoria beat a hasty exit out the frosted-glass door. Ellie started to follow, but Miss Deetch held up a hand.

"One at a time, Eleanor."

Alone with the principal, Ellie tried not to squirm. The room hummed with quiet, so Ellie said the first thing that came to mind.

"That's a nice pin you're wearing, Miss Deetch."

Miss Deetch continued to look at her.

"It's real patriotic and...and..."

"Thank you, Eleanor." But Miss Deetch's chin quivered, eyes blinking rapidly. Ellie realized, to her horror, that the principal was about to cry.

"Did I say something wrong, Miss Deetch?" she asked. "I'm sorry."

The principal cleared her throat and forced a smile. “It’s not your fault, my dear. The pin was a gift from my nephew in the service.”

“Oh,” said Ellie. “Where is he now?” As soon as she said it, she wished she hadn’t.

“He’s a prisoner of the Japanese. We do not know exactly where. We haven’t had word in some while.” She stroked the brooch. “Cherish this time with your brother, Eleanor. You don’t know when he’ll be called into the service.”

Miss Deetch squared her shoulders, and in her usual principal’s voice said, “Run along and wash up now. And no dilly-dallying on the way to class.”

Ellie scuttled off to the girl’s washroom, still arguing in her head with Miss Deetch.

You’re wrong, Miss Deetch. By now, the draft board has forgotten all about Jimmy.

But even to Ellie, her thoughts sounded as hollow as the feeling in her stomach.