

CLINGING

**BRUCE
RYAN**

Chapter 1

DARK, SUNKEN EYES and a defeated countenance were how the three boys remembered their mother. Chelsea, London, England in the early 1800s was not an easy place to live with three sons under six and a worthless, drunkard husband. William had taken to the bottle in 1825 after the birth and death of their only daughter, Elizabeth, who was named after her mother.

The eldest of the boys, William, named for his father, was born in 1821, and Henry 1822. They remembered the night when their mother found Elizabeth blue in the crib. The sight of the little, perfect body, though lifeless, would stay in their memories until the end of their days. George had limited memory of the event, as he was very young at the time, but he did remember the image of her frail body.

The family had no money to send William and Henry to be educated, and though George, the youngest, started school in 1830, their miscreant father's trouble with the law made it impossible for him to continue. Elizabeth had used her family to make ends meet, borrowing from her mother, though her father had disowned her when she became pregnant with William, forcing her to marry his hapless father. She had also borrowed from her brother and sister, but there being no way for her to pay them back, all her bridges were finally burned.

Living in a two-room hovel, the boys all knew the violence of their father when drunk. When he began to rant, they would disappear to the outdoor toilet, which served four families. They all knew what would happen next. Their mother had always borne the scars and bruises. The old widow, Towton, who lived on the ground level of the adjacent building, once found them freezing in the outbuilding and gave them food, though she could spare little. This became a regular event in their lives while their father's drinking money lasted. Towton feared the violent man, as did all of the neighbours, and so could not take the boys in to protect them. She often brought old clothes out to them with the food, doing as much as she dared.

The boys had been told that their father fought in the street to make enough to service his bar tab, and many times, he had been arrested for stealing and other petty crimes. Most of the time, however, the witnesses refused to testify when they heard the record of the violent offender they were accusing. Finally, the law had its way, and in 1831, William Douglas was found guilty of assaulting an officer in the local army corps and was sent down for a term of three years.

Elizabeth succumbed to the dreaded consumption in 1832. This fate also befell her husband soon after. The boys stayed with Towton for some months, before she, too, was taken by the terrible disease. This was nothing new to the people of Chelsea, with one in five deaths being attributed to consumption or cholera at the time. None of the family members was in position to take the boys in, and soon, William and Henry were moved to a shoe factory, where they were put to work treading urine-fixed dye into leather.

George was taken to an orphanage in Yorkshire and never saw his brothers again.

Though the luck of the draw had conspired against the three, each worked hard and became a respectable member of their community. At twenty-five, William married Eliza, who was only fourteen, and immediately, they began a family. They had three children under the age of five when the bitterly cold winter saw all three youngsters in quick succession succumb to the awful influenza epidemic. The couple, though devastated by the loss, decided to start again. In 1855, William joined the East India Company's army. Rumours of an uprising had seen its army numbers increased by one hundred and twenty percent.

William was thirty-four when he arrived in India. Eliza and her

twins, born shortly after William had shipped out, arrived just as the uprising began in 1856. In 1858, after the revolt had been suppressed, the family decided to migrate to Australia. During preparations, Eliza found she was again with child. Agnes was born in 1858. Eliza was a sickly woman who found giving birth again more difficult than expected. Despite this fact, and the incredibly rough crossing to Australia, the family arrived together in early 1859.

Henry was lost to the family at that time, but later found to have been in India from the early 1850s.

George suffered through an unpleasant young life in the orphanage, and it is here that our story begins. The Dorothy Winterview Orphanage for Homeless Children was not as welcoming as the name made it sound. Once, it had been a great building designed as a private hospital. The rich socialite for whom the building had been renamed had donated it some thirty years earlier for its current use, perhaps to assuage some socio-economic guilt.

When George arrived, he became a whipping boy for the sadistic housemaster James Draper; this pitiful excuse for a human being would beat children terribly to ensure their obedience. Though often, he would thrash them for his own enjoyment. A doubled-up belt was his usual method of torture, but he would use his bare hands or feet if they were the only weapons available.

George had felt the weight of heavier blows when his father was 'under the weather', and if knocked down, would spring right back to his feet to be hit again. Many of his house companions revered him as the bravest in their midst, and all knew that while Draper was beating George, he was leaving them alone.

Infuriated by the strength of the boy's character, Draper took to striking him in the middle of the chest at the start of each day's work in the laundry, which was the only form of income the orphanage had, following the death of their benefactor several years earlier. This violence would take the wind right out of George, and Draper would stand over him, sneering, saying things like 'Not so smart now!' or 'I thought you were supposed to be tough?'

One morning in his second year at the orphanage, George decided to take things into his own hands. He placed a square cast-iron drain cover inside his shirt and tied it in place with several strips of bandage he had taken from the infirmary. This wasn't so well thought out, for

though it had the desired effect of breaking two of Draper's knuckles, it also cut George's chest open and snapped two of his ribs. It served to enrage Draper even further. He backhanded George across the face and jumped on top of him, punching him with his undamaged fist. He almost certainly would've killed George, had another housemaster not intervened and dragged him away to the infirmary for treatment. George's friends carried him to a linen bale, where two of the older boys treated the bleeding and bandaged his ribs.

In the workhouse, the boys each had a quota of items they had to wash each day. Now the group divided George's share and started to work hard to cover that extra load. Draper did not return that day, having his hand set in a long plaster. One of the younger and more compassionate guards, Gibson, made sure that the boys were completing their quota. Many of the guards would give the boys a whack if they stepped out of line, but they never had the intent to severely injure a child.

George was quite tall, strong, and tough for his age, but this incident laid him low for several days. He was placed in the infirmary under the care of Mrs Marshall, the nurse, cook and laundry co-ordinator.

Marshall was one of the few pleasant adults the boys had contact with, and several girls helped her run the areas she controlled. When Draper returned to work, he was placed in the house for older boys; the rumour was that Mrs Marshall had complained about his treatment of some boys. This wouldn't have swayed the orphanage's board of governors had she not said that the purchase of bandages and the loss of work were affecting its bottom line. Gibson was placed in Draper's position, to the great relief of the boys.

While in the infirmary, George struck up a friendship with a beautiful blond-haired girl named Willow, who was one of Marshall's assistants. She was kind and gentle when changing his dressings and always spoke to him kindly, even though she was three years his senior.

They told each other of their former lives, and she explained that she had gained her name when she was five or six. Her father decided that she didn't look like a Gail, and her hair blew in the breeze like the foliage of a weeping willow. George was far too young to consider love, but he admired Willow, and over the next three days, they struck up quite a close relationship.

When George came back to his house, he was regarded as something

of a hero, having rid them all of the terrible scourge that was Draper. The boys crowded around, keen to see the eighteen stitches across his midriff.

Martin Hyland was perhaps George's closest friend and was first to meet him when he was returned to the house by Willow. Martin, who was two years older than George, knew Willow; he'd been known to intentionally injure himself to visit her. He had already informed her that he was going to be her husband. As yet, she hadn't responded to his proposal, but they had kissed at their last meeting.

After greeting George and leading in three cheers for him, Martin turned his attention to Willow, offering to walk her back to her house.

'That won't be necessary,' she said, seeing the eyes of all the other boys on her, waiting for her answer.

'Perhaps not, but I will anyway.' Martin offered her his hand.

She took it and, as they exited the room, the group as one gave a knowledgeable *Oob*. She and her suiter both blushed.

The walk was hardly that, as the houses faced each other across an open courtyard, which measured no more than forty yards. Willow's delivery into safety completed, Martin quickly began his recrossing. He noticed, skulking in the shadows at one corner of the yard, smoking an extremely long pipe, none other than Draper. He could tell Draper was watching him and increased his gait.

Draper strode to intercept him and grabbed him by the arm just yards from the door to his house. 'Tell your little mate Douglas I'll catch up with him.' Draper sneered and pushed Martin toward the door.

Martin rushed inside and, finding George surrounded by his admirers, rapidly recounted his meeting. The boys shot furtive glances at each other. They all knew what Draper was capable of.

'Well, there isn't much we can do about it. If we report him, he'll just call you a liar and deny everything,' George said.

'We should tell Mrs Marshall,' Martin suggested. 'At least she's honest.' He was supported by the rest of the group. George made no comment but nodded.

After a short time spent discussing other things that had happened during George's convalescence, the group prepared for church. Being Sunday, the entire contingent of boarders and staff were expected to twice march to the church, which was approximately two miles from

the orphanage. There was no money for 'Sunday-best' clothing, and many of the garments were on their third or fourth hand-down, either from larger boys or those who'd perished in the infirmary. Saturday's wash had been conducted, and all had a clean change of clothes for worship. This was a great luxury as their work clothes were only washed every other week.

Willow seemed to glow in Martin's eyes, her face surrounded by her beautiful wind-swept hair. Martin was also blond and tall and thin for his age, though everyone was thin at the orphanage. Inmates weren't allowed to walk together in a 'co-ed' fashion as in some other schools. The boys were led by their three housemasters, the girls some twenty paces behind, led by their two mistresses. The rest of the staff, including the two gardeners and several housemaids, followed with Mrs Marshall.

After church, the children were allowed to walk calmly and respectfully around the churchyard and speak to each other in quiet tones, always under the eye of the ever-watchful staff. This was the only real social outing that the general populace were allowed.

Occasionally, a child was selected to go to some big house and become a possession of its master. For six years, if they were indentured as an apprentice, and sometimes for longer. If an owner hired an orphanage child for domestic duties, they would never really be compelled to name that child truly qualified. An upstairs housemaid, for instance, may always remain just that, if it was thought she wasn't comely enough to be seen by guests.

This was the best one could hope for, however. If not selected by the age of sixteen, one would be directed to the workhouse and there exploited mercilessly until some formal contract could be signed.

Though the orphanage was geared to make money to pay for its staff and upkeep, and to pay more-than-generous stipends to its board members, a need to show that the inmates were being educated was thinly adhered to, with all students under sixteen having lessons three afternoons a week in mathematics and English. These lessons were given by the housemaster, and George was excelling under Gibson's tutelage. He had a natural aptitude for mathematics, and though his English was raw when spoken, he could at least read and write basic sentences. Martin was also doing well at mathematics, though Gibson seemed to have given up on his English, once saying cruelly, 'If one

sounds like a guttersnipe, one will be treated like a guttersnipe.’

In fairness, Gibson and most of the other housemasters had been hired as guards and had no formal teaching qualifications. The board of governors could therefore pay them as guards while covering the education program.

After one Sunday church service, Martin and Willow were observed holding hands on one of the wrought-iron benches around the parish hall. The housemistress who saw this rushed up to them and demanded that ‘all expressions of an inappropriate nature cease at once’. The couple, who hadn’t realised they were being watched, separated their hands and thought no more of the matter.

On return, both were called to the governor’s office individually and berated for ‘wantonly bringing the orphanage into disrepute’. They were banned from speaking to one another for a month.

This was a long time for Martin, who was smitten by Willow, his first love, and he resolved to break the order at his earliest convenience. George and all his housemates vowed to help them converse if possible. Each in his own way was proud of Martin’s sally into the unknown realm of romance.

Gibson liked the boys in his house, and they, in turn, gave him little difficulty, knowing how much better off they were with Draper gone. That evening, Gibson spoke to Martin, telling him that Draper had pushed for a year of non-communication. Most of the other masters and mistresses had little problem with the incident, thinking it a very minor infraction, but Draper had lobbied hard for the ban, and the governor relented but lessened the parole period to one month.

‘He’s gunning for you, boy,’ Gibson told him. ‘Don’t even look in her direction.’

‘But, sir, we weren’t doing anything wrong,’ Martin pleaded.

Gibson raised a quizzical eyebrow. ‘The rules on fraternisation are strict, as they must be, and you would both do well to observe them.’

Martin simply said, ‘Yes, sir.’

Gibson stood and left. George had been in the room with several other boys, and though they’d been at a fair distance, they’d all heard the discussion.

‘What are you going to do?’ one of the group asked as they all rushed up to the bed where Martin sat.

‘Not sure yet, but a month is a long time,’ he answered.

‘Just keep away for the month, and he won’t be able to touch you,’ George suggested sympathetically.

Martin nodded. He took what Gibson had said seriously, and the conversation ended as the bell for the evening meal rang. All knew that being late would see them going without food for the night and serving as dishwasher at its end, so their immediate response was guaranteed.