

# Chapter One

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“So what are you going to do with the rest of your life?” Bram asked his companions.

Alistair looked quietly contemplative, or perhaps just befuddled for a moment.

“I really have no idea,” he answered eventually, and then added, “But anything’s better than being in the Army.”

The third occupant of the carriage compartment, who had been staring out though the grimy window at the darkened countryside rushing past, turned to face them.

“I want, no, I need to have a purpose, an objective, some proper place in the world,” Tom said, with a surprising amount of passion given the lateness of the hour, “I just want to feel that I was doing something worthwhile.”

Alistair drowsily grunted his approval, already on the verge of sleep. Bram nodded thoughtfully.

The three young men who were travelling together had been friends and comrades in the Army. After the conclusion of hostilities in Germany and Japan, and the end of what people were already calling the Second World War, their military service had been abruptly terminated.

Their demobilisation had been eagerly anticipated but, even so, it had happened with a speed and efficiency that had surprised them all. They had arrived on a troopship at Southampton, the last stage of their journey home after serving in central Europe. All three felt tired and sick after the sea trip, as none of them were particularly good sailors. Their platoon had then been transported by truck to the Aldershot barracks. Tom, who was a northerner by upbringing, was not entirely sure exactly where Aldershot was, and finally concluded that it was just “somewhere in the south of middle England”.

After a short stay in the barracks, with a minimum of military discipline, they had been issued with civilian clothing, travel warrants and their back pay, and then turned loose.

Neither Tom nor Alistair had any very close family. Tom’s parents had died under mysterious circumstances while he was still a child. He had been brought up by his Granny, his mother’s mother, but she too had died during the War. He had been overseas at the time, and was unable to attend the funeral. He nevertheless felt duty-

bound to pay a brief visit to his grandmother's sister, who still lived in the county of Kent, in order to offer his condolences.

Alistair's family lived in the far north of Scotland. His father had died when he was very young. This was said to have been a terrible accident, involving a very grand gentleman during the grouse-shooting season. Alistair's father had been supplementing his income from the smallholding by acting as a beater on a shoot. The full circumstances, according to everything he had heard over the years, were peculiar, even mysterious. After the accident, his mother, utterly overcome by grief and anger, was never in good health again, and had passed away shortly after Alistair joined the Army. He had a letter requesting that he make an appointment with a solicitor in London; something to do with wills and inheritance, he had been informed.

Tom already knew that Bram had family ties in North East England, not far from the Scottish border. Bram had already mentioned that he had some business to attend to in London, although he was vague on the details.

Since all three of them had commitments in or around the capital, they decided to regroup in a few days time. As planned, they had met up in a popular public house just outside King's Cross railway station in London. This particular pub was located partially under the railway bridge arches, with the inner rooms actually formed from the archways themselves.

It was getting dark on that summer's evening, and the weather had been warm and muggy for days. Fortunately, the inside of the pub, especially the back rooms, was relatively cool although rather dark and smoky. It was crowded and very noisy, with the sounds of raucous voices bouncing off the brickwork of the arched ceiling.

Tom, whose compact and wiry frame made him a first choice for this kind of manoeuvre, weaselled his way to the bar where, after a few frustrating minutes of trying to catch her eye, the barmaid disinterestedly pulled three pints of ale. Tom wound his way back through the crowd to his companions, clutching the precious beer tankards to his chest.

Typically, Bram managed to find them a table to themselves in the jam-packed pub. Despite that fact that the entire bar was heaving, a group of travellers drained their pints and stood up just as the three of them were passing, and they were able to slip into the recently-vacated seats almost before anyone else had noticed.

"Lucky Bram!" Tom thought, "How does he always manage to do it?"

Tom took a sip of his beer. It was tepid and flat (which was intentional) and rather thin and sharp in flavour (which it most certainly was not supposed to be). Alistair took a pull from his own pint, and winced visibly.

“Don’t like this beer much,” he moaned, “Are you sure there’s actually any alcohol in it?”

Tom snorted his agreement with the sentiment, then swept up his own pint.

“Well, here’s to the future, lads,” he said, “And preferably a future which does not include the Army.”

Together, they toasted their re-union with the rather inferior beer.

They had planned to take the Edinburgh night train on the East Coast line from King’s Cross, alighting at Berwick-on-Tweed. After sampling a second pint, drunk more out of necessity than enjoyment, Tom thought, they left the hostelry and made their way across the road to the railway station.

Demob pay and travel warrants did not easily stretch to sleeping compartments, so the three companions faced the prospect of a rather cramped overnight trip holed up together. The station was hot and grimy, and they fought their way along the crowded platform struggling to keep together, a feat made more difficult by the steam and smoke billowing from the engines.

Despite the pressing throng, somehow Bram managed to find a compartment in the train which was otherwise unoccupied. He had rushed ahead down the platform, nimbly forcing his way through the crowd, with his pack thrown over his shoulder. He could now be seen waving frantically from the doorway of a coach which, except for the mail coaches, was located immediately behind the engine. Bram’s luck, again, Tom thought as he and Alistair boarded as quickly as their bulky kitbags would allow. They hustled their baggage down the narrow corridor and practically fell through the sliding door.

The train departed just a few moments after they had reached the compartment indicated by Bram. There was a considerable increase in noise from the engine, and the view from the window was immediately obscured by steam. There was a series of jerks which caused all them to stagger for a moment, followed by a cacophony of clatters and thumps as the train made its way over the points to join the main line to the north.

The companions set about making themselves as comfortable as possible on the worn upholstery, using their kit bags as pillows and greatcoats as blankets.

“Well, it may not be much,” Bram said, stretching out along one long seat, “But it’s certainly more comfortable than some of the places we’ve been.”

This was true, thought Tom. The three of them had been through a number of formative experiences together, in turns exhilarating, nauseatingly unpleasant and downright dangerous. He was vaguely looking forward to doing something altogether less stressful.

Their talk turned to what they would do now. Neither Tom nor Alistair had any very well formed plans. Their recent and surprisingly sudden departure from the Armed Services had left them feeling slightly rootless, even homeless.

“Well, if you like, come along with me,” Bram suggested, “I’ll have to show up at home sometime, I rather think, but I’m in no particular hurry to get there. I dare say that I’ll have to turn up to face the music sooner or later, but frankly I’d prefer later.”

Tom thought that Bram felt slightly uneasy, even embarrassed about the disparity of their relative positions, or perhaps he was just acting out of sympathy. He could recall a previous conversation where Bram had described his relationship with his parents as a bit strained.

“They’re all right, I suppose,” Bram had explained at the time, “Mum’s a kind soul, but she does nag a bit sometimes. Dad’s a bit distant, very serious and hard-working. He thinks that I’m a bit of a ne’er-do-well.”

Bram wriggled into a more comfortable position, and stretched out with his hands behind his head.

“After all, we’ve got all the summer ahead of us,” he continued, warming to the topic. “I’m sure we can get jobs on a farm, earn a few bob. It might feel like a holiday after the Army.”

Tom felt a touch uneasy at the prospect.

“Never done a farm job,” he mumbled, “Never been on a farm, actually.”

Alistair, who had been brought up on a smallholding in Sutherland, rejoined pragmatically.

“Oh, farm work’s not difficult,” he explained, rousing himself, “It’s just heavy and sometimes dirty. It’s basic labouring, you know: pick that up, carry it here, put it there.”

“Just like being in the Army then,” Tom quipped.

They all laughed.

“Well, at least there’s no Sergeant Major to shout at you,” Bram countered.

“Ah, but you still have to get up early, though,” Alistair said, although he did not sound particularly worried by the prospect.

“That’s true enough,” Bram said, still grinning widely, “Although I hope the breakfasts will be better.”

This was a factor which weighed fairly heavily on their minds, or possibly just their stomachs. Both during the War itself, as well as immediately afterwards, almost every necessity was rationed. Beer, petrol, meat, even bread was subject to careful control through the ration-book system. Of course, this had led to a thriving, almost omnipresent, black market, and in practice almost anything could be obtained if you had the right contacts and deep pockets. There were also one or two places where additional food might be available beyond the organised black market. It was a racing certainty, Tom thought, that there would be better rations on a farm.

The companions fell silent. Tom could already hear Alistair’s snores over the *clickity-clack* of the carriage wheels on the track. The rocking motion of the train, together with the relative warmth and comfort, not to mention the few pints of beer, appeared to have made them all feel very drowsy. Tom fell asleep to the soporific sound of the steam train forging its way north.