

Chapter One 1.03.26 With Seeds

Let's Go, Will

The carriage trembled, not from speed, but as though it had remembered something it was trying to forget.

Peter's head knocked softly against the cold glass of the carriage window. He jerked awake, breath catching in his throat, hands instinctively searching for a rifle that was not there.

Silence.

Not silence exactly. There was the faint ticking of cooling metal, the low murmur of distant voices, the soft complaint of steam escaping somewhere ahead. But no artillery. No whistling descent. No earth tearing open.

He blinked.

Outside the window lay a field so green it almost hurt to look at. Furrows turned fresh and dark. A hedgerow stitched neatly along its edge. Beyond that, a village sat in the gentle fold of the land, chimneys sending polite ribbons of smoke into a pale spring sky.

A signpost stood at the edge of the field, whitewashed and untroubled.

Little Barchester Halt

The name was so absurdly English it felt like a storybook.

His heart, which had been pounding like a drum calling men over the top, began to slow. The bile that had risen in his throat eased. The air did not taste of cordite. It smelled faintly of coal smoke and damp wool.

He was not in France.

He turned his head sharply, half expecting the carriage to be filled with stretcher cases, mud-streaked boots, men without faces.

Instead, he saw polished leather seats, six abreast. Two young soldiers in uniform sat opposite the aisle, grinning at one another over some private joke. Their boots were newly cleaned, their caps slightly askew in the careless way of men heading home rather than toward death.

An elderly woman knitted with fierce concentration, silver needles clicking like disciplined insects.

A priest, kindly-faced and spectacled, bent over a crossword, pencil hovering thoughtfully.

Ordinary.

Painfully, beautifully ordinary.

OPPORTUNITY TWO TO CONTRIBUTE

There was one seat beside the elderly woman that remained empty. Not reserved. Not claimed. Simply unoccupied, as though someone had meant to sit there and thought better of it. The leather bore the faint impression of recent weight. On the luggage rack above rested a military kitbag, straps neatly buckled, a name tag half-turned away from view. No one reached for it. No one claimed it. Yet it travelled with them.

WHAT IS THE STORY.

Peter's hands trembled in his lap.

“Steady on, Peter.”

The voice was familiar in a way that went deeper than memory.

He looked up.

Opposite him, knees almost touching, sat Will.

Will's expression was the same as it had been in the trenches when the shells began to land short. Calm, measured, the faintest upward twitch at the corner of his mouth. A man who had seen too much and decided not to let it take the last of him.

OPPORTUNITY THREE TO CONTRIBUTE

Yet when the train slipped briefly through the shadow of a passing embankment, the reflection in the window did not immediately answer for him. For a moment, the glass held Peter clearly, the priest faintly, the old woman in silver flicker — and where Will should have been, the light seemed undecided. It was there. Then not. Then there again. The priest glanced up from his crossword as if sensing a draught that had not touched his skin, and then returned to his clue.

WHAT IS HIS STORY.

“We're just heading to the coast, mate,” Will said quietly. “You always said when it was done, we'd see the sea proper. Not on a troop ship. Not crammed in like cattle. Just you and me. Walk the port. Stand on the breakwater. Do some quiet fishing. Remember?”

Peter stared at him.

The words sounded like something he might have said. They felt right in his chest. But they did not bring pictures.

“I... remember wanting the sea,” he said slowly. His voice felt unused, as if it had belonged to someone else for a long time. “To feel... steady.”

“That’s it,” Will nodded. “Ground under your boots that isn’t trying to swallow you. Water that isn’t full of wreckage.”

Peter swallowed.

The train gave a long sigh and began to move again. The fields slipped by in gentle procession. A farmer guided his horse-drawn plough with patient rhythm. A dog barked at nothing in particular. A scatter of early flowers brightened the edge of a ditch.

OPPORTUNITY ONE TO CONTRIBUTE

A pair of labourers paused at the edge of the field, caps lifted automatically at the sight of uniforms. Respect had become reflex. Behind them, a cottage stood freshly painted, but its upstairs window remained boarded. A small placard hung at the gate. Let Agreed. Further along, beyond what had once been uninterrupted pasture, a new factory chimney pierced the skyline, smoke rising in thin determined lines. The land was healing. The nation was altering

WHAT IS THEIR STORY.

Spring.

He closed his eyes for a moment and saw instead the Somme. Mud the colour of old blood. Trees like broken matchsticks. A sky that had forgotten how to be blue.

Verdun.

France.

Years of it.

He opened his eyes quickly.

“I don’t know where I am,” he said, the words emerging before he could stop them. “I don’t know how I got here.”

Will’s gaze did not waver.

“French hospital,” he said gently. “You remember the blast. You were lucky. They shipped you back when you could stand. De-mobbed in London three weeks ago.”

London.

The word struck nothing. No images rose to meet it.

“I was... discharged?”

“Aye.”

Peter rubbed his temples. His thoughts felt like loose pages in a gale.

As he did, something shifted against his waistcoat pocket. He reached instinctively and drew out a small object.

A pocket watch.

Its brass casing was scratched. The glass faintly cracked across one edge. The chain still strong.

He stared at it.

“I don’t remember this,” he said.

Will’s eyes flickered briefly.

“You carried it all through,” he replied. “Stopped once, when the blast hit. Started again in the hospital.”

Peter pressed the latch. The cover sprang open.

Inside, etched faintly along the inner lid, were two initials intertwined.

R & P.

The second hand moved. Steady. Relentless.

The watch ticked softly between them, quieter than artillery, louder than doubt. Time survived what men did not.

“What’s my name?” he asked suddenly, panic flaring bright and hot. “I mean... I know it’s Peter. You said it. But it doesn’t... sit.”

Will leaned forward slightly.

“It’s yours. It’ll settle again. Give it time.”

Peter's breath came quicker.

"My cottage," he said. "Rosie."

There. A flicker.

A girl's face turned toward him beneath a church arch. Dark hair pinned hastily. Eyes bright with tears she refused to let fall. The hurried ceremony before he returned to the front. The smell of flowers and starch and fear.

Rosie.

"My wife," he said, gripping the edge of the seat. "I married her before... before—"

"Before you went back," Will finished softly.

"Yes."

Peter searched for the cottage. It hovered just beyond reach, like a word on the tip of his tongue.

"It's in a village called..." He leaned forward, as if the name might be hiding on the floorboards. "It's in..."

Nothing.

The space where the name should have been felt vast and echoing.

"It's all right," Will said again, and there was no pity in his voice. Only steadiness. "We'll find it. We'll find your Rosie. Maybe it's the coast calling you first, eh? You always said the sea clears a man's head."

Peter exhaled slowly.

Perhaps that was it.

Perhaps the memory of the cottage was tied to the rhythm of waves. To salt on the air. To the cry of gulls over a harbour.

Perhaps the mind, battered by years of thunder, needed something older than war to anchor it.

The train clattered over a bridge. Below, a river flashed silver in the sun.

He watched it go.

On the far side of the carriage, one of the young soldiers laughed out loud. The sound was pure and unburdened. The old woman glanced up from her knitting with mild disapproval. The priest filled in a square with decisive satisfaction.

Home.

That was the word everyone used.

He was home.

Safe.

And yet he did not know himself.

He pressed his palm to the cool glass again, as if testing reality.

“Will,” he said quietly, “did we win?”

Will considered the question.

“They say we did.”

Peter nodded slowly.

It felt like a strange kind of victory, one that did not resemble the word at all.

Outside, the land began to shift subtly. The fields broadened. The air seemed brighter. There was a sense, almost imperceptible, of openness ahead.

He felt his eyelids grow heavy.

Not the collapse of exhaustion. Something gentler. A tide going out.

“For the first time,” he murmured, half to himself, “it’s quiet.”

Will’s voice came like a distant anchor dropping.

“It’s over, mate.”

The train rocked steadily on, wheels singing against the rails.

Peter let his head rest back against the leather seat. The cold sweat on his skin began to dry. His heartbeat, once a frantic drum, settled into something human.

The countryside rolled past, alive with birds and bees and the patient labour of farmers who had never left.

Somewhere ahead lay the coast.

Somewhere beyond that, a cottage whose name he could not yet speak.

And somewhere within him, buried but not lost, the rest of his life waited to be remembered.

As the train curved gently toward the light, Peter surrendered to sleep.

Will watched him for a moment longer, then turned his gaze to the horizon where the faintest hint of sea-glow shimmered under the sky.

The abandoned kitbag shifted slightly on the rack as the carriage rocked. The pocket watch continued its quiet measure. Outside, England carried on — altered, repaired, remembering.

“Let’s go,” he said quietly.

And the train carried them on.