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CHAPTER ONE

Matt stood in the open doorway and saluted. Sam looked at him shyly. His brother looked older in his uniform, and somehow rather important.

'See you at Easter,' said Matt.

'Wish I could go too.'

'They don't take kids in nappies where I'm going,' grinned Matt. He aimed a playful punch at Sam's chin. Sam thumped him in the stomach.

'Don't hit Matty,' cried Clare. She pushed Sam out of the way and threw herself into Matt's arms. Matt tossed her high in the air, then hugged her tight and ruffled her dark brown curls.

'Bye bye, my little chocolatey Clare. Be good for Mummy and I'll bring you back a stick of rock.' He lowered her to the floor and put his arms round his mother.

'Look after yourself, Matthew,' said Hetty Lonsdale. 'Write to us with news whenever you can. We'll be thinking of you.'

'Chin up, Mum,' said Matt cheerfully. 'I'll be back before you know it.' He kissed her on the cheek, and moved forward to shake hands with his father. Arthur Lonsdale was having none of that. He grasped his eldest child by the shoulders and held him tight.

'Take care, son,' he whispered. In that moment, Sam was shocked to see that his father was close to tears.

Matt broke away hurriedly and picked up his bags. 'Got to go,' he said. 'Can't keep Blighty waiting.'

He heaved his backpack up over his shoulders, pushed his way through the door, but turned round again. 'Don't let the midges bite,' he whispered to Sam, then he strode down the path, out through the gate, and marched off along the road towards the village.

Sam stood in the doorway and watched his brother's back until it disappeared round a corner. Then he closed the door and ran upstairs to his

bedroom, his and Matt's bedroom, except that Matt wasn't there to share it any more. The spaces left by the few things that Matt had taken with him seemed like great black holes, yet the crumpled sheets of his unmade bed appeared to mock with their attempt to pretend that everything was normal; that their occupier would be back that night.

Sam turned away and gazed out of the bedroom window. Below, his father was walking down the long garden path, carrying a bowl full of corn. Sam watched as he reached the wooden building at the end of the path and went inside, then he kicked his bedroom wall, shouted, 'Stupid pigeons! Stupid, stupid pigeons!' and threw himself on to his bed.

Clare came into the room sucking her thumb and clasping a shabby rag doll.

'Mummy says it's your turn to lay the table,' she said, triumphantly, 'and you're to do it now.'

'Go away,' shouted Sam, 'and take that rotten, smelly doll with you.'

Clare burst into tears. 'I hate you, Samuel Lonsdale,' she cried, 'and I wish you'd gone away and not Matty, and I'm going to tell Mummy of you.'

'Tell-tale-tit,' retorted Sam as she fled, but he felt rather ashamed. It wasn't Clare's fault that there was a war on, that his brother had gone away to fight, that he dreaded going back to school now that the Christmas holidays were over, that he felt so useless, that his father was too wrapped up in his pigeons to care. But that wasn't fair either, was it? Hadn't he just seen for himself that his father cared, even though most of the time he tried not to show it? Or was it that when he tried to show it, Sam pushed him away? He went to the window again and made an effort to cheer himself up with an image of his father wrapped up in pigeons. 'Funny language, English,' he mused.

His mother knocked on the door and came in. 'Why so angry, Sam?' she asked gently. 'We're all hurting, even Clare. Particularly Clare, perhaps, because she doesn't understand what's happening, except that someone she loves has gone away.'

Sam shifted uncomfortably. A voice inside him protested that he had the right to hurt the most, but he found himself saying, 'Why are we carrying on as though nothing's happened? I mean, like taking

turns at laying the table, going back to school, feeding pigeons, scrubbing behind our ears even? What's the point?'

'Because,' said his mother, 'if we stop, then we will become paralysed with fear and sadness. And if we put our heads in our hands and weep, then we will be betraying Matthew and all the other brave men who have gone to fight on our behalf. We owe it to them to try to keep going, so that when they come home there is something for them to come home to. End of speech. Now, are you going to lay that table, or am I going to wallop you with the dish mop?'

'Wallop me with the dish mop,' grinned Sam, 'but first you've got to catch me!' He darted past her, flew downstairs into the kitchen, picked up the dish mop himself, wet it, and stood ready to attack. As soon as his mother came into the kitchen, he smacked the dish mop round her neck and headed off down the garden path, hysterical with laughter. Hetty raced after him, Clare trotted after them both, determined to join in the fun. They fell down on the grass in a giggling heap, just as Arthur Lonsdale came out of the pigeon loft. In his hands, he held a dead pigeon.

'I should have noticed before,' he said, 'but with everything else going on ... They just pecked away at it, until it gave up. I should have noticed it wasn't strong enough to fight back.'

'Poor little pigeon,' said Clare. 'Will it go to heaven?'

'I'm sure it will,' said Hetty.

Sam wondered why the fuss about one pigeon when there were dozens more in the pigeon-loft: dozens more all the same, all noisy, all messy, all taking up too much of his father's time, and now spoiling the bit of fun they were having in the middle of an unhappy day. Worse than that – but no, no, no, he wasn't going to think about it. He refused to think about it.

Supper was a gloomy affair that evening, despite Hetty's attempts to cheer everyone up. The blackout curtains didn't help. Not a glimmer of lamplight could leak out, but neither could a glimmer of moonlight trickle in. Arthur hardly spoke. Clare babbled anxiously about starting school and could she take her doll and how would she know where to go and what if nobody liked her and what if a bomb fell.

Sam realised with a pang just how much they were going to miss Matt. Matt had such an easy way about him; everyone relaxed in his company, even his father. He wasn't especially good-looking or clever, but he drew people to him with his big smile and the way he grabbed life with both hands and took out of it what he wanted.

'Lucky army,' thought Sam. 'They'd better send him back.' Then, as the forbidden fears began to crowd in again, Sam thought, 'Stupid army, stupid Hitler, stupid war! It's your fault Matt won't be there tomorrow.'

Sam struggled to get to sleep that night. It was strange not having his brother snuffling and grunting beside him. His mother had stripped Matt's bed and left only the eiderdown over the mattress. No pretence of normality there any more. Matt had gone away, and Sam had no doubt that tomorrow he would have to face the consequences of his brother's absence.

When at last Sam fell asleep, he dreamed that the spaces left by the things Matt had taken grew and grew until they formed one enormous black hole,

which swallowed him up. There was no way out of the hole, but pigeons found their way in and began to peck at him, over and over again. He hit out at them with his fists and feet, but they kept coming at him. He curled himself into a tight ball, but still they pecked at him, until just as he was about to give up, he woke. He lay there, motionless, in the pitch dark, terrified that the pigeons were in his room. He felt around for the torch on his bedside table and switched it on, comforted by the beam of light. When he felt safe again, he jumped out of bed and moved some of his own things into the gaps left by Matt.

He woke up next morning exhausted, and knew that the nightmare might now begin for real.