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Opening extract from

My Brother's Keeper

Written by

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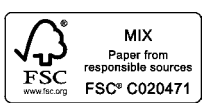
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MY BROTHER'S KEEPER

TOM AND TONY BRADMAN



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Chapter One

A Great Adventure

Alfie Barnes peered into the darkness shrouding no-man's land and wished he were taller. Like the rest of the men in his section he was in position on the trench's fire-step, but he could only just get his head up to the level of the sandbagged parapet. As for using his rifle if they were attacked – well, that would be almost impossible.

He could hear the usual rumbling of the big guns in the distance. Ours, not theirs, he thought, having learned the difference over the last few weeks. There was a burst of machine-gun fire somewhere, a sound that made him think of thick cardboard being ripped. That wasn't close either, but Alfie still gripped his rifle more tightly.

‘Hey, Ernie!’ he said to the man on his left. ‘Can you see anything?’

Ernie turned to look at him. Only a silvery sliver of moon and a few faint stars shone in the night sky, so Ernie’s face was in shadow beneath his canvas-covered helmet. Their breath formed small clouds of white mist in the cold air.

‘Pipe down, Alfie!’ Ernie hissed. ‘Do you want to get us killed?’

‘Keep your hair on, Ernie,’ muttered Cyril, the next man along. ‘Old Fritz ain’t interested, mate. He’s still tucked up nice and warm in his dugout.’

‘Oh yeah?’ said George, the man beyond Cyril. ‘You never know with Fritz. A whole division of Prussian Guards might be creeping up on us right now.’

Alfie turned back to examine no-man’s land, excitement suddenly coursing through him. Maybe this was it, the moment when he would actually do some fighting – after all, that was what he’d joined up for, wasn’t it? Half an hour before dawn every day the two hundred and fifty men of the company had a ‘stand-to’ along the three hundred yards of trench they occupied, then again at dusk, the most likely times for an assault. But there had been no attacks

since Alfie had arrived in the line, and his excitement seeped away as he realised nothing was going to happen this morning, either. The sky was slowly growing lighter in the east, a pale sun casting its feeble glow on the shell craters and tangles of rusting barbed wire that separated the British and German trenches. There were no living men in no-man’s land, only the scattered, rotting corpses of the dead.

‘You’re an evil swine, George,’ said Cyril. ‘Always teasing the lad.’

‘You don’t care, do you, Alfie?’ said George. ‘You like it, really.’

George looked round Cyril and Ernie to wink at Alfie, and the boy grinned. It was true, he didn’t mind. Most men felt it was their duty to tease young lads – such was the natural order of things. Alfie had suffered worse back in England, or Blighty as his new mates had taught him to call it. His dad was a porter in Covent Garden market and had got him a job there when Alfie had left school at the age of twelve. The other porters had teased him relentlessly, but it had all been in fun.

There was more light now, the sky turning a bruised grey, and word came along the line to stand down. Alfie slung his rifle over his back and jumped

off the fire-step, avoiding the deep puddle of mud filling the trench bottom at that point. He followed his mates to the dugout they shared, a shallow cave scooped in the side of the trench and half screened off with an old bit of sacking. Inside were four empty ammunition boxes they used as seats and some planks they took it in turns to sleep on.

'Do your stuff, Alfie,' said George, lighting a fag. 'I'm dying for a brew.'

Ernie lit one of his roll-ups and Cyril puffed at his pipe. They'd all been on at Alfie to smoke since he'd arrived, and he'd tried it once, but didn't like the way it had made him cough and feel dizzy. He filled the kettle with water from a five-gallon petrol can and set it on the blue flame of their small primus cooker, a treasure they guarded fiercely. Cookers were few and far between, and most of the other men used candles stuck in dixie tins to boil their kettles, which took a long time. Alfie and his mates, however, could have their hands round warm mugs of tea in a few minutes.

He looked at them now in the pale morning light, these three young men who had taken care of him since he'd arrived at the Front. George was dark and wiry and full of jokes; Cyril was big and fair and liked his creature comforts; and Ernie was skinny

and ginger and a worrier. All three were wrapped up against the cold, with sheepskins or leather jerkins over their uniform tunics, scarves round their necks and extra pairs of socks under their puttees and boots. Alfie was kitted out similarly, thanks to them. They had scrounged whatever he needed, and taught him an awful lot too.

But then he was only fifteen, and daft to be there, as George was always telling him. Alfie didn't agree. It had been the best day of his life when he'd joined the crowd at the recruitment drive in Lewisham Town Hall and persuaded the sergeant to sign him up. 'How old are you, son?' the big red-faced man had said. 'Nineteen, sir!' Alfie had replied, knowing that was the age you had to be. Alfie was short and scrawny and knew he looked young, even for a fifteen-year-old, so it had been a tricky moment. 'I suppose I'll have to take your word for it,' the sergeant had said, grinning.

Alfie's mum had been very upset, but his dad had shaken him by the hand and said he was proud to have such a brave son. The family had seen him off at the station when he'd left for training camp, his mum and younger brothers and sisters sobbing their eyes out. He hadn't cried, though. He was going to

fight for his country, to make sure the Huns wouldn't come marching up Lewisham High Street in those ridiculous spiked helmets of theirs. Besides, he was sure it would be a great adventure.

So far it hadn't turned out that way. Training had been three boring months of drill and being shouted at by lots more red-faced sergeants. After that he'd been sent off by packed train and crowded ship across the Channel to France. Then he'd been left kicking his heels for a month at a huge base camp where the sergeants had been even worse.

He had finally been despatched to the Front in Flanders three weeks ago, but still hadn't fired his rifle, not once. He was beginning to think he never would.

'Watch out, lads,' Ernie murmured. 'Here comes the Captain.'

Alfie turned to look further down the trench. Captain Wilkins was heading towards them with Lieutenant Reynolds and Sergeant Jones just behind him. They were all dressed in the same way as Alfie and his mates, in steel helmets and scarves and thick jerkins over their service tunics, although only Sergeant Jones carried a rifle, a Lee Enfield .303 like the rest of the men – the officers had Webley

revolvers in leather holsters on their belts. The Captain nodded or spoke to all the men he passed, most of whom were brewing up too. Eventually he reached the dugout and stopped.

'Morning, chaps,' he said with a smile. 'Cold enough for you today?'

Alfie liked Captain Wilkins, even though he was a toff and didn't much fit his idea of an officer, being plump, of medium height, and softly spoken. The Captain cared for the men under his command. Each day after morning stand-to he toured the line, and he always had a cheery greeting for everyone. Alfie wasn't so keen on Lieutenant Reynolds, a slight young man who was a toff too, but never said much. The lads had decided the Lieutenant had grown a moustache to make himself look older, but the wispy fluff on his upper lip had just the opposite effect. Sergeant Jones was the same as all sergeants, a bulldog of a man with a loud bark.

'Morning, sir,' said George. 'There's definitely a nip in the air.'

'At least it isn't raining,' said the Captain. 'And Jerry still seems to be keeping his head down in this sector, which is something else we should be grateful for.'

‘I don’t know about that, sir,’ said Alfie. ‘I’d like to see some action.’

‘Quiet there, boy!’ barked Sergeant Jones. ‘Don’t cheek the Captain!’

‘Easy, Sergeant,’ said Captain Wilkins. ‘My superiors at HQ would be pleased to hear him being so war-like. You’ll get your chance, Barnes, but this company has done plenty of fighting, and I’m sure your comrades have told you it was no picnic.’

‘Amen to that, Captain,’ muttered Ernie. George and Cyril nodded.

‘Anyway, you should all be feeling rather warmer soon enough.’ The Captain’s smile returned. ‘I’ve ordered a double rum ration to be dispensed.’

‘Very good of you, sir,’ said George. ‘That should put a few hairs on our chests.’

Everyone laughed politely.

The rum ration was doled out each morning, and most of the men knocked back the small tot of foul-smelling, thick black liquid with lots of lip-smacking and gusto. Alfie couldn’t stand the stuff, and wouldn’t touch it.

‘Well, cheerio, we must be on our way.’ The Captain headed along the trench, hopping on the fire-step to avoid the puddle. ‘Make sure the duckboards

here are replaced today, Jones. This mud could be the death of someone.’

Alfie heard a crack like a firework going off. The Captain crumpled, his knees folding, and he fell headlong from the fire-step into the mud with a wet thud. His helmet came off, and Alfie saw a hole the size of a sixpence in his temple.

Dark blood oozed from it, and Alfie knew he had just watched a man die.