# Homeland

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# Chapter One

HE SLIPPED back to the farm in much the same way as he had left it seven years earlier, in the gloaming of an October evening by the drove-road over Curry Moor. The last light lay in blazing bands across the western sky, making fiery ribbons of the puddled cart-ruts, which stretched out before him, rod-straight, to the wetland edge. The drove appeared deserted as far as the metalled road and the stone bridge, but he strode along at a sharp lick all the same, the sooner to escape the exposure of the open moor, for he knew what people would say if they spotted him coming by this route, that he was running true to form, stealing back like a thief in the night. He had judged the risk worth taking nonetheless, for the chance to do his business quickly and get away unseen.

Mounting the ramp to the small arched bridge, he tensed momentarily as a horse and rider rose up over the crown, but it was only a gypsy boy, bareback on a snorting pony, the creature's eyes glinting red in the sunset. Mercifully the river-top path was clear of people, so too was the path that dropped down to the damp stubble of Hay Moor, but he didn't slacken his pace till he was over the rhyne and starting up Frog Field, when an odd discordant sound caused him to

pause, his soldier's instincts reaching out into the dusk. Above his head bats darted and fluttered in jerky parabolas, while in the meadow below, cows stood solidly against the dying light. At last the sound came again, and, making out the distant yawling of a dog, he walked rapidly on.

He crossed an orchard rich with the scent of fallen apples, which bumped and scuffed against his boots. Looping around the back of Old Maynard's farm, he heard the dog much closer, howling and jerking at its chain. A rarely used path kept him away from the lanes and cottages for a while longer, until, meeting the North Curry road, he was forced onto its ringing surface. Hitching his knapsack higher on his shoulders, he stepped out at a smart clip, but if there was anyone to witness his jaunty march he never saw them. A minute later he gained the shadows of the next footpath which undulated across two fields before sloping down towards the dark expanse of West Sedgemoor.

Even before he sighted the inky line of pollards that marked the old rhyne he felt the cool breath of the wetland against his cheek, he heard the faint riffling of the wind in the withies like the rustling of a woman's skirts, he caught the boggy smell of water and overblown vegetation, scents and sounds that brought a surge of memory, unexpectedly powerful, disturbingly sweet.

A place called Sculley Farm lay ahead. He had intended to skirt its southern boundary, but it was getting too dark to attempt the narrow overgrown path along the wetland edge. Instead, he swung across a field and climbed over a stile onto a lane of loose stones which chimed and rattled under his boots. Coming

abreast of the farmyard, a shape detached itself from the darkness by the wall.

A scratchy voice called out, 'Who's that there?'

He would have walked on, but the figure lurched into his path.

'Watch out!' he exclaimed sharply.

An old man's laugh, a blast of cidery breath. 'Billy? That you, Billy Greer?'

'For Christ's sake!'

'Let you out then, did they?'

Billy dimly recognised an old fool named Percy Frith, and brushed roughly past him, annoyed at having been identified, and yet more annoyed at letting it show. He was still berating himself as he strode down the track to Crick Farm. Several times in as many yards he renewed his vow to leave the moment he had finished his business, to get clear away and never come back.

The cottage sat low and dark against the wetland; the damp seemed to rise around it like a mist. A glimmer of light was showing in the kitchen, another behind the curtain above. Entering the yard by the latch-gate, Billy's toe caught on a piece of tangled metal that clanged and clattered as he kicked it aside. Underfoot the concrete was soft with a carpet of stripple and mulch, while in the middle of the yard he almost walked into a pile of withies, mouldering by the smell of them. He felt the first creep of foreboding as he came across more clutter around the lean-to porch: a loaded handcart, a cider barrel with sprung hoops, and, propped anyhow against the shiplap, a jumble of scythes and rakes.

The kitchen door opened on uncertain hinges. He called a greeting and heard only the muted tones of

brassy dance music trumpeting from a radio upstairs. At first everything appeared unchanged: the draining board scrubbed and bare, plates slotted neatly into the rack above, dishcloths drying on the clothes-horse in front of the range. Then he felt the chill in the air, he saw the stubby candles guttering and no lamps, he saw on the table the remains of a solitary meal, and it struck him that one of them must have died. This thought triggered the apprehension he always felt at bad news, the prick of guilt and alarm, the sense that, however remote the event, however innocent his part, blame would somehow attach itself to him. Only with an effort did he remember that such thoughts belonged to the past, that he had nothing to reproach himself for. That he never did have, except in his own mind.

Overhead, the muffled dance music gave way to a sonorous BBC announcer. Billy picked up a candle and carried it through into the cramped hallway. He called up the stairs and heard an exclamation followed by the shuffle of feet. Uncle Stan appeared on the landing above: a fierce white face over a shadowy body.

'It's me – Billy.'

'For the love of God,' Stan exclaimed.

'How are you, Old Man?'

Stan clomped down the rackety stairs, wheezing like a pump engine, and peered at him through damp eyes. 'So you be back, then.'

'Not for long,' Billy stated rapidly. 'I can't stay.' When Stan made no sign of having heard, he repeated slowly, 'I – can't – stay.'

The old man's face took on the expression Billy remembered so well, closed, stubborn, remote. Billy

gave a humourless laugh. 'Same old Stan, eh? Where's Aunt Flor?'

With a small lift of his head Stan indicated the room above.

'How is she?'

Stan's mouth turned down.

'What's wrong?'

But the old man only shook his head and moved away into the kitchen.

Billy followed. 'Is she ill?'

Another silence.

'Well, either she's ill or she's not ill.'

Still nothing. This had always been the old man's way, to use silence as a weapon of irritation, but Billy wasn't going to rise to the bait, not this time round. As the old man moved towards the larder, Billy ducked his head in front of him and repeated tolerantly, 'Well?'

'What's the point in harping on about it?' the old man demanded with a quiver of agitation. 'There ain't nothing to be done.'

'How can I be harping on about it when I've only just arrived? When I don't even know what's wrong with her.'

'It were a stroke, weren't it? A *stroke*.' The old man was trembling.

'All right, all right. Just simmer down.' Billy wasn't sure what a stroke was, whether it was the same as a heart attack. 'Is she bad?'

Turning away, Stan sat down heavily at the table. 'Bad enough.'

Billy felt like asking what the hell that was meant to mean, but managed to hold his tongue. He looked

down at the old man indecisively. He hadn't allowed for this, the sag of the shoulders, the air of defeat, the sense that the old man had grown smaller, almost defenceless. Yet even as he wondered if he might be feeling something as unexpected as pity he had a memory of Stan on the withy beds, glaring at him angrily, delivering a stream of scorn, and the feeble impulse to sympathy died.

In the larder Billy found cider, bread and cheese. Sitting in his old place, perched on the chair with the uneven legs, he poured two jars of cider and pushed one across to Stan. 'So, when did all this happen?'

'I told yer . . .'

'You've told me nothing,' Billy stated firmly.

The old man glowered at him, on the point of arguing, only to hesitate and jam his mouth shut. It wasn't a retreat exactly, more a pause for thought, but it was enough to give Billy a small spark of satisfaction. Over the past few months he had rehearsed this scene countless times in his mind – the calm he would show in the face of the old man's provocation, the indifference to any mention of the past, the effortless authority he would impose on the conversation – and had pictured the look of surprise and respect that would creep over the old man's face as it dawned on him that Billy was a very different person from the one who'd left seven years ago. And here it was, sooner than he'd dared hope: the first hesitation, the first glimmer of respect.

'Start from the beginning,' Billy said.

'It was at the victory celebrations,' Stan offered at last, frowning at his glass, taking a sudden gulp. 'The church bells were rung all morning. The whole village

turned out, gathered there in front of the George. There were tables set up with pies and cakes, and the landlord selling ale at a penny a pint. Jimmy Summers brought his fiddle along, and everyone were dancing, right there in the lane.' Stan gave a small snort. 'Even old misery guts, the Baptist minister, took to shuffling a bit. Lifting his feet up and down like the ground were a bit hot underfoot. Flor thought it the best thing she'd seen in a long time. Yes, in a very long time.' Stan pulled a packet of Woodbines out of his pocket and lit up before remembering his manners. Still avoiding Billy's eye, he slid the packet a few inches across the table, and watched Billy help himself. 'Flor, she always loved to dance. Her were light on her feet, oh yes indeed, light as a feather. Knew all the steps. Well, there she were, dancing fit to bust, whirling round and round, when all of a sudden she stumbles and grabs my arm. I thought she were just dizzy, yer know, from all the spinning about. But it were the stroke. I caught her just before she hit the floor. Caught her and held her clear. The doctor were fetched, but there weren't nothing he could do. The whole of her right side were gone, face, arm, leg, and some of the left side too. She'd lost the power of speech, and the doctor thought she might've lost some of her understanding too. But she understands everything I tell her all right, and no mistake.'

It had happened over a year ago, he said. There had been no change since.

'You should have told me,' Billy said.

'Didn't know where to write, did I?'

Or couldn't be bothered to find out, Billy thought. It wouldn't have taken more than five minutes to look through the bureau in the parlour where Flor kept the

family papers and find his address. She had written to Billy throughout the war, two neatly penned sides sent on the first and fourteenth of every month, regular as clockwork. After Billy's regiment landed in France, her letters had sometimes taken weeks to catch up with him, often arriving in twos and threes. He remembered with a nudge of guilt how he had skimmed through them, indifferent to the world he had left behind. The only letter he'd read more than once was an early one, some six months after he'd joined up. After that, he'd lost interest in the gossip, and his replies had been at best sporadic, a couple of lines on a postcard if Aunt Flor was lucky. When her letters stopped abruptly, he'd told himself it was because the war was over and she no longer thought it necessary to write. If he'd felt the occasional twinge of concern he'd ignored it easily enough, for if his early life had taught him anything it was to expect sudden, unaccountable change.

After a second glass of cider – the cloudy brew slipped down, more bewitching than memory – Billy felt as ready as he ever would be to follow Stan up the narrow stairs to the room that, during his four years at Crick Farm, he had entered only once, to repair the window.

As Stan opened the door the sound of sickly violin music rose up to greet them. The room was lit by a candle standing low on the bedside table. The candle in Stan's hand added a spasmodic flickering glow to the dark side of the room. Aunt Flor lay in the iron bed, propped against the pillows. At first Billy thought she was awake, then he thought she was dead, finally he saw that she was asleep. The stroke had left her face askew, as though a great weight were tugging down on

one cheek. The right side of her mouth was dragging and dribbling, while her right eye wasn't altogether closed even in sleep, so that the white gave off a feral glint in the candle beam.

'Who does the caring for her?' Billy asked in a rough whisper.

'Why, myself, that's who,' declared Stan, as if this should have been obvious.

Billy didn't like to imagine what was involved. He would have turned away but his gaze was held by the drooping eye. It reminded him of a girl he and his mates had dug out of a house in Belgium. The girl's eyes had been rolled back under half-closed lids, the whites coated in a film of dust, until she was carried out and dumped in the sunlight when the whites gave off an unearthly, almost sinister gleam. The girl had been pretty, her body unmarked. Except for the eyes, she too might have been asleep.

'I've come to fetch my mum's stuff,' Billy said over the sobbing violins.

Wordlessly, the old man turned for the door.

'Will you tell her that?' Billy said, following him out onto the landing.

'You can tell her yerself,' said Stan, starting down the stairs.

'What, now?'

'When she wakes.'

'When will that be?'

'In the morning.'

'But I've told you – I'm not staying.'

'Please yourself.'

In the kitchen, Billy said, 'Tell me where my mum's stuff is, then.'

'Couldn't say, could I?'

They exchanged a hostile glare, and for a moment it might have been the old days again. Going through to the parlour, Billy made a quick search of the bureau before accepting that he had lost all chance of getting away that evening. He dug out papers and letters of every description, some old, some new, many still in their envelopes; he found birth certificates, mementos and photographs, but nothing belonging to his mother. In a pigeonhole he came across the cards and letters he had written to Flor during the war. They were tied in bundles, placed next to the letters from the son in Canada. Another son had died as a child, while the daughter lived in Plymouth, bogged down by children.

By the time Billy got back to the kitchen it was in darkness and the old man's footsteps were creaking overhead. Picking up his rucksack, he climbed the stairs to his old room under the eaves. Ducking under the lintel, setting the candle on the table, he had a fleeting memory of his first sight of this room, with its sloping ceiling, low-set window, and sturdy oak-framed bed. He was fifteen then and had been living rough for a year. Caught pilfering from a market stall – apples, of all things – he had been 'saved' from the full force of the law by these two relatives he barely knew. The magistrate had told him he was lucky, but Billy wasn't fooled. He knew that it was a punishment by any other name and the sentence hard labour. And nothing about that first night – not the warmth of the mug of malted milk in his hand, nor the fullness in his belly, nor the unaccustomed smoothness of sheets against his skin – had done anything to alleviate his sense of injury. He'd been deceived by a large meal and a soft bed once

before when at the age of nine he'd been carried off by his Aunt May to a life of prayer and moral correction in Bridgwater.

Now, all these years later, he could see above the bed the same mysterious bulges in the rose-and-columbine-patterned wallpaper, and on the ceiling the same crusty rings erupting from the whitewash like lichen blooms on rock. There was no getting rid of the damp down here by the moor, and it was only fools who tried. Its fusty fragrance filled the air and misted the wooden surfaces and rotted the curtains. On the bed the starched linen had subsided limply onto the topography of the mattress. He guessed that Flor had made up the bed a long time ago, ready for his return. Well, it was no good, he wouldn't be staying. And the way Flor was now, she wouldn't know enough to care.

The unaccustomed silence kept him awake for some time. When he finally slept it was to be roused at least twice by the hooting of an owl, then, much later, by the banging shut of a door. He had the impression of sleeping little, yet when he woke it was to full light.

He lay back with a sense of indulgence. There'd been no staying in bed in the old days, no missing of the morning. The old man had been a stickler for getting to work sharp at six, winter and summer. But this morning Stan wasn't calling impatiently from the kitchen, 'Let's be seeing you!', he was clumping about in the bedroom opposite, to the muted strains of dance music. Billy shifted indolently on the pillow and watched the sunlight trickling in through the unwashed glass, casting hazy beams over the edge of the battered chest of drawers which had housed all his worldly possessions, reflecting dimly in the wall mirror from whose crazed

and mottled glass his uneasy adolescent frown had glared back at him each morning. The only visible remnant of his four-year occupation was hanging on the back of the door, an ancient railwayman's jacket that Aunt Flor had found for him that first winter, bartered from the crossing keeper for two months' supply of eggs. She hadn't thought him worth the expense of a new one, not then.

Getting up at last, he went to the chest and pulled open an upper drawer. His adolescent paraphernalia was still there: fishing hooks, string, cigarette cards, penknife, pencils. And in a lower drawer his old working clothes, neatly folded and smelling of mothballs. He tried on a thick woollen shirt that had always been too big but now fitted quite well. The trousers, though, were tight at the waist, and he had to leave the top button undone and use a belt. Down in the porch he found his old gumboots at the back of a shelf, covered in dust. The rubber was dry and cracked, but there were no obvious holes.

By the time he stepped outside it was almost eight. The yard was a sight. The mound of withies he'd almost tripped over in the darkness was all canker and rot, while the frame that stretched the full length of the yard was stacked with bundle on bundle of withies, which, going by the coating of lichen on the weather side, had been put out to dry a long while back and not touched since.

In the woodshed, amidst another almighty jumble, Billy found a thick layer of coal dust, a scratching of coal nuggets, and some two dozen apple logs. The peg where the axe used to hang was bare. He hunted high and low, shifting sacks, kegs, barrels and a wheelless

barrow before unearthing the axe on the floor beside a paraffin drum. Even then it took a good five minutes with the whetstone before the blade would split the wood the way he liked it, clean, in a single stroke.

He rifled the mound of cankered withies for kindling, but gleaned only mulch. The porch offered better pickings: a brittle apple basket, the base frayed and sagging, and a clutch of spraggled withies, ripe for burning.

He was crouched in front of the range, nursing a meagre flame, when he heard Stan's tread on the stairs.

'You're still here then,' the old man said.

They took a fresh gawp at one another.

The light, slanting upwards from the window, revealed fresh crags and fissures in the hillocky landscape of Uncle Stan's features. Born and raised in the last century, too old for the Great War let alone the one just ended, he'd always seemed ancient to Billy, though even now he was probably little more than seventy. Despite a back bowed and calcified by a lifetime's withy cutting and lungs that were clugged up from a steady sixty a day, the old man had always kept an almost impish energy. But now this too had faded; Billy saw it in the labour of his breathing and the droop of his eyes.

'Managed to stay in one piece then?' the old man said.

'More or less.'

'Well, you look well enough on it, at any rate.'

Billy tried to see himself as Uncle Stan must see him: taller by a good inch, broader in the chest, muscled by a steady diet of meat and potatoes. And more worldly. Yes, that would show too.

'I'll just get it warmed up in here, all right? And then I'll be off.'

The old man tipped his head towards the range. 'You'll not get it to draw properly,' he said with a pull of his lips. 'Chimney's buggered.'

'What's the trouble?'

'Jackdaws. Soot. Lord only knows.'

'I'll give it a jiggle then.'

'It'll take a lot more than a jiggle.'

'Haven't lost your sunny outlook then.' But the remark was lost on the old man, as Billy had known it would be. Returning with some willow sticks, he found Stan putting a match to a small Primus stove.

'Is that how you've been cooking then? With paraffin?'

'She can only take porridge or broth. It's good enough for that.'

'Paraffin's not going to warm anyone's bones, though, is it? Not in the cold. What's happened to the coal?'

'There ain't no coal.'

'Well, I can see that, can't I? What's the problem?'

'Officialdom, that's what. Little Hitlers, the lot of them.'

Unbolting the port in the flue, Billy thrust a stick up the chimney and, lashing a second stick to the base of the first, soon came up against the blockage. After a few jabs, a cascade of soot and lumps came tumbling down the flue, filling the range and billowing into his face.

Half an hour later he had the fire drawing, the kettle on the hotplate, and his face and hands cleaned up. By the time Stan came down from giving Aunt Flor her breakfast, he'd made a pot of tea and poured the first cup.