Part One
North Africa
1942
And here was a world intact, like a dream of his childhood. After years of war, not a sign except the intriguing sight from the train of numerous unfamiliar young women in the fields, land girls brought in presumably from Birmingham and Coventry, too distant to be seen properly, labouring silently. In London there were shelters, sandbags, militarised parks, blacked-out windows and gun emplacements. Here, nothing, trees washed through with sunshine and bird-song, the smell of the ground breathing upwards through the thick moist heat. As Will started out, his feet remembered the exact rise and fall of the walk home from the station. How perfectly his senses interlocked with the place. He knew that when he rounded this corner, yes, here it was, the peppery smell of the river before he could see it. He could picture the dim bed of round stones, the swaying weeds, its surface braided with currents. A *full-fed river*. Behind his left shoulder, away up for a couple of miles, was the rippled shape of an Iron Age hill fort where he’d played as a child, battling his brother down from the top. Everything here was still clean and fresh and in place, the countryside sincere and vigorous. It was as though he were walking through the first chapter of a future biography, with his kitbag on his shoulder.
Will decided to avoid the village and headed down through the wood. According to his father this was a recent planting, maybe only a hundred years old. It was still coppiced in this section, which had a peculiar regularity. The evenly spaced, slender trees always made him think of stage scenery. When the wind died the coppice had an indoor quiet, the quiet of an empty room.

‘And where do you think you’re going?’

Startled, Will turned to see his younger brother, Ed, wearing his hunting waistcoat, his open shotgun hooked over his shoulder. ‘For God’s sake, Ed.’

Ed smiled. They shook hands.

‘You didn’t hear me, did you?’

‘Can’t say I did.’

‘Makes a fellow wonder who’s been in training and who hasn’t.’

Ed was much given to stealth. He loved hunting and had a straightforward aptitude for it that Will sometimes envied, often mocked. Ed would appear suddenly in a room, quiet in his body, his senses splayed around him, then smile and go out again without saying anything. Father had been in a way similar, although sharply clever, a quiet grammarian indoors but a sportsman outside, hard-riding, red-faced, breathing great volumes of air, his hair sweated to his head. A mere schoolmaster, he’d been invited to join the hunt after the last war when he’d returned with a medal, with the medal. It was outdoors that Will was allowed glimpses of what he took to be his father’s mysterious heroism, that undiscussable subject. There was a kind of calculated rampaging, his movements
very hard and linear. Ed had a different quality. He was less reflective, less troubled by thought, simply a live moving part of the world of trees and creatures and water. Will wasn’t sure how he himself would be described. He wasn’t a natural sportsman although he was efficient and strong enough. He always noticed the moment of commitment, the threshold he had to cross between thought and action, his mind instigating his body. He didn’t think he should notice; it made him feel slightly fraudulent. His movements were effective but too invented. He was playing a part.

‘Why aren’t you fishing?’ Will asked. ‘I can’t imagine there’s anything left to shoot. I thought the woods would be stripped bare with rationing having everyone setting snares and popping their shotguns.’

‘Ah, but for them wot knows the old woods like I does.’ He opened his waistcoat to show hanging inside its left panel a rabbit, teeth bared and eyes half closed. ‘And,’ he said, reaching into his front pocket and carefully lifting out a bird, ‘. . . there’s this.’

‘You little tinker. A woodcock. When everyone else is working on the nth permutation of bully beef.’

Will took the bird from him. Its head, weighted by its long bill, hung over Will’s fingers on the loose cord of its neck. The small body was still warm, the plumage shining with the airy burnish of a living bird. Will’s senses were lighting up, home again after weeks of training grounds, weapons drills, diagrams, distempered huts and dismal food. ‘That’s a very kind homecoming gift,’ Will said.

‘It isn’t any such thing,’ Ed said and took the bird back, refolding its wings to fit into his pocket.
‘All for you. You going to sell it on the black market?’

‘No.’ Ed was impatient. ‘I’ll give it to Mother. You’ll probably eat it tonight in a pie.’

‘Did she send you out to meet me?’

‘Er, no. How could she if we didn’t know you were coming?’

They walked out of the wood, the shadowy trees gently breaking apart to reveal the river, there with the sun on its back, the fields glowing beyond.

Will narrowed his eyes at the view.

‘Ah, yes.’

‘Pleased to be home?’

‘I won’t be back for long.’

They turned away from the riverside and up a rise to come out into the lane. Either side of them as they walked back to the house the hedgerows were lively with small birds, the verges starred with the blues and purples of wild flowers.

As they entered the front garden, Will called out, ‘Ma! Mother!’ They rounded the side of the house and entered through the back door. Immediately he was inside, dropping his kitbag down beside the boots and walking sticks and umbrellas, Will felt himself claimed by the familiar aroma of the place. It was a combination of many things – carpets, dogs, wood, the garden, the damp in the cellar – too subtle to be separated. It was more a mood, a life. It contained his school holidays, his father’s presence, his father’s death. A world intact.

‘Oh, Mother! Where art thou?’

He found her in the kitchen, leaning over the table with palms pressed flat either side of the newspaper.
‘Surprise.’
‘Oh, crikey, yes. It’s this one. Here he is. William of Arabia,’ she said, lifting her spectacles and fixing them on top of her head before reaching her arms towards him, and waiting. That annoyed him, the quick flash accusation of emulation. As though T. E. Lawrence were the only man in the world to learn Arabic, to be a soldier. He walked towards her and she took hold of his shoulders with hands that were scalded red. She must have just been busy in the sink. He looked into that emotional round face, her eyes moist and diffuse with poor sight, her heavy cheeks hanging. She pulled him forwards over the long incline of her bosom and kissed him vividly on the temple.
‘So you’ve survived training?’
‘Outwardly I seem fine, don’t I?’
‘Near enough.’
‘Some chaps broke significant limbs with the motorcycle training.’
‘Motorcycles?’

Hearing the voices or scenting him, perhaps, the dogs came shambling in. Will bent to Rex first. The King Charles spaniel squirmed down onto its haunches and whisked its feathery tail. He rubbed the soft upholstery of its ears. Will had a voice he used for the dogs, clear, enthusiastic and mocking. ‘Look at you. Look at you. Yes, indeed.’ Teddy, the black Labrador, his large mouth loosely open, panted and bumped against Will’s legs, trying to insinuate his sleek head under Will’s hands. ‘Oh, and you. Yes, boy. Yes, Teddy. Oh, I’ve missed you too. Yes, I have. I have.’
Squatting down now, Will combed his fingers through the rich, oily fur at Teddy’s nape. He felt the upswept rough warm wetness of Teddy’s tongue against his chin.

‘Don’t overexcite them, darling.’

‘They’re dogs, Mother. They overexcite themselves. You do. Yes, you do. Pea-brained beasts. They’re just pleased to see me again.’

‘Broken limbs on motorcycles, you said.’

‘Off motorcycles. Up a hill as fast as you can, whizz round then down again likewise. They disconnected the brakes to make it more difficult. There were chaps strewn all over. And they call it “Intelligence”.’

‘Do they? Ah, would you look at that.’

Will glanced up to see Ed laying his kills on the table, the woodcock’s wings dropping open, the rabbit stiff and grimacing, the fur on one side blasted.

‘Number two son brings great treasure.’

The predicted pie appeared for supper, the fine dark meat of the woodcock, with its flavours of dusk and decaying leaves, and the clean tang of the rabbit were both impaired by a horrible margarine pastry. They ate economically without candles or lights. Through the windows floated a soft lilac light. It hung in the room, almost as heavy as mist, and made the striped wallpaper glow with dreamy colour. Will realised how tired he was at the end of his training, at the end of a lot of things, and posted now, although Mother was yet to ask, off to the war finally. His mother spoke as though overhearing his thoughts.

‘You know I had hoped the war would have finished before you got dragged into it.’
Will sat up. He was horrified. ‘But you wouldn’t want me to miss my chance.’
‘I think I could cope.’
Ed said solemnly, ‘A man wants to fight’, and Will laughed.
‘And how would you know?’
‘Boys.’
‘Look, it’s my duty, isn’t it? It needs to be done. It’s what Father would have wanted.’
‘I’m not so sure you know that about him,’ Will’s mother said quietly.
‘Why wouldn’t he?’
‘You’re his son.’
‘I know that. All somewhat academic, anyway. I’ve been posted.’
His mother looked up at him, her dim eyes watery, a rose flush blotching her neck. ‘Have you?’
‘Yes.’
‘And?’
It wasn’t what he’d wanted. It was not what he deserved, with his Arabic and ambition. He had been warned by one NCO during training, a sly and adroit Cockney who seemed to be having the war he wanted, who had friends in the kitchens and spat at the end of definitive statements. ‘You need blue eyes,’ he’d said, smoking a conical hand-rolled cigarette, ‘to get a commission. Take my word for it. You’ll end up in the dustbin with the rest of them.’ There was a look for the officer class and Will didn’t have it. Five feet nine inches tall, he had dark hair and dark eyes, a handsomely groomed round head and a low centre of gravity. This was unfair. In his soul he was tall, a traveller, a keen, wind-honed figure.
The man who sat at the last in a sequence of desks Will had visited, the man who decided Will’s future, considered the paperwork through small spectacles and made quiet grunting noises like a rootling pig. Finally he looked up. ‘All very commendable. Languages. I’m putting you in for the Field Security Services.’ The dustbin.

Will pinched the bridge of his nose. ‘If I may, sir, I was hoping for the Special Operations Executive, you see, I . . .’

‘The duty to which we are assigned,’ the man interrupted, as though finishing Will’s sentence, ‘is where we must do our duty.’

And so Will had humiliated himself precisely in the way he’d told himself he never would.

‘Sir?’

‘What?’

‘Sir, I’m not sure I should mention this but my father, you see, in the last war . . .’

‘Yes?’

‘Distinguished himself. He was awarded the VC. I . . .’

‘Oh, excellent. Jolly good. You should try to be like him.’

The personnel of the unit to which Will was assigned was like a saloon bar joke. *An Englishman, a Welshman and a Jew . . .* And lo and behold his commanding officer was tall, blue-eyed, a wistful blond, younger than Will by a couple of years, an Oxford rower, perfectly friendly, unobjectionable and unprepared. To Will he said, ‘And suddenly we’re all soldiers. All a bit unreal, isn’t it?’ But they weren’t soldiers. Not really.
The only danger Will could perceive with the FSS was spending the remainder of the war guarding an English airbase doing nothing at all.

Will considered how much of this to tell his mother as she asked again, ‘And?’

‘You needn’t look so worried. I’m not going far just yet. Port protection sort of thing. Security.’

‘Isn’t that police work?’

Ed, leaning low over his plate, looked across to see Will’s reaction.

Will felt an urge to throw his drink in his mother’s face. He pictured vividly the water lashing out from his cup and striking. It was a thought he had now and then, in different company, just picking up his cup and hurling its contents into the face of whoever it was who had provoked him. He wouldn’t ever do it but in those moments the vision of it was so clear and fulfilling that he had to resist. ‘It is what I have been assigned to do until I am posted abroad.’

After supper they listened to the wireless, angling their heads just a little towards its glow and chiselled voices, their eyes vaguely involved in the carpet or what their hands were doing, his mother sewing, the needle rising and sinking, thread pulled tight with little tugs. The dogs slouched around the room, lay down and got up again. Will called Teddy to him and patted his smooth, hard head. The wireless made Will crave action and involvement with a physical feeling akin to hunger, an emptiness and readiness in his tightened nerves. He was very alert. He’d had years of this now: battle reports, a burning, piecemeal geography of the war, and war leaders and chaos, victories
and defeats. And propaganda, of course. You couldn’t really know what was going on, but Will with his intelligence, deep reading and cynicism made shrewd guesses. The reports on the wireless were so charged with possibility and vibrant with what was never said or admitted about the battles, the terror and exaltation. The mere cheering of victories didn’t come close to what Will supposed the reality must be. The war was large and endlessly turbulent. There was room in it for someone like Will, for his kind of independent mastery. He could make elegant and decisive shapes out of the shapelessness. He wanted in. By it and with it and on it and in it.

When the news reports gave way to dance band music, Will got up to go into his father’s study.

The room had its own stillness. The book spines. The vertical pleats of the heavy blue curtains. The solidity of the desk with its paperweight, mother-of-pearl-handled paper knife, the blotter and wooden trays. Behind Will, the sofa on which his father had died.

Somewhere in a drawer in this room was the medal his father never took out. The room’s composed silence was like Will’s father. He had always raised a hand halfway to his mouth and coughed quietly before he spoke, preparing himself to do so. Sometimes Will felt as though the empty study might do the same, clear its throat delicately and say something neat and short, something devastating. A terrifying rupture of his reserve had presaged Will’s father’s death. He’d come back from the hunt after being unhorsed. He’d landed badly, apparently, and sat down to dinner looking pale
with a deep red scratch trenching his cheek just beside his nose. There was a small notch taken out of his forehead also. Ed asked what had happened.

‘What do you bloody well think happened?’

‘Darling . . .’

‘What are you leaping into the breach for? Damnfool question. And I have a pounding headache. Christ.’

He leaned over and vomited onto the carpet right there at his feet. They all sat there waiting through the noise, the wrenching up out of his body. Teddy ambled over afterwards and sniffed at it.

Father sat up straight and gulped water. ‘Don’t all gawk at me like that. I’m obviously ill. I’m going to lie down.’

He stood up, swayed, and stalked out to his study. Half an hour later, Will’s mother found him dead on the study sofa. Dead and gone having hardly ever said anything at all to his sons. There was much to cherish, of course, in Will’s memories but he was gone, a man who had always known more than he said.

Will read along a shelf. Something fine and sharply enhancing of his intellect. Lucretius on the nature of the universe? Why not? It had that fine brilliance and fearlessness as a description of the world, bright bodies in space. Distinctive also. Let the other fellows always be quoting Cicero and Virgil. And reading Latin would keep his mind active. Will would have this and his Arabic poetry. The Lucretius was a squarish, green-covered volume. Inside he saw his father’s pasted ex libris, signed with his fastidious, vertical pen strokes. Henry Walker, 1921.

He began reading it that night under the low, sloping
ceiling of his boyhood bedroom, intending to remember and look up the words he didn’t know.

In the morning he drew the curtains. A neutral day, the light white and even. There was none of the gorgeous lustre of the previous day and this was almost a relief. The world was a realer place, more practical. Then he noticed in the glass of one pane of the window the twist of bubbles. He’d forgotten about them, or felt as though he had, but if asked at any time he could have sketched their exact distribution, rising through the clearness. They had been a small magic of his childhood, catching the light differently, sparkling a little. And they were part of his room, his world. As a child he’d almost felt them inside himself, a sensation of excitement spiralling up in his breast. And they connected his room to the river, as though his windows were formed from panels of the river’s surface. That river there, brown and steady, rather workmanlike today. The bubbles in the window filled him, even before he’d gone, with a large nostalgia for this house and the landscape and his childhood. It was poetical at first but gradually he became aware of a dark outline around that feeling, a constriction, and realised that it was fear. His life, unexciting as it may have been so far, was still a detailed, complicated thing. In its own way, for him, it was precious. It would be a lot to lose.

He turned away and examined the small bookshelf in this room painted with creamy white paint that showed the tracks of the brush. How to. Boys’ adventures. Alice. The Wind in the Willows. Ah, yes. He realised that it had been in his mind since his return. A full-fed
river. By it and with it and on it and in it. He’d loved that book as a boy with its small engrossing illustrations, darkly cross-hatched and tangled like nests holding the forms of the characters. Sentimental, of course, but he decided to take it too.

At breakfast Will told his mother that he was off that day to his posting and she fell silent. They chewed through their rough and watery meal of national loaf and powdered eggs – here, in the countryside, they were eating powdered eggs – and after that she disappeared. Will was used to interpreting her silences, particularly those of the stricken widow period, and he knew what she was saying. A stiff, stoical farewell was all that was required but instead she would force him to think of her, helpless and alone in this pristine place in the middle of England that the dark, droning bombers had swept over on their way to flatten Coventry. She would be here all the while imagining him blown to bits. This thought demanded that he imagine his own death also and that was deeply pointless and unhelpful. Typical: her determination never to make a scene often resulted in strange, cramped, unresolved scenes like this. Useless woman. A boy going away to war without a goodbye from his mother.

Ed walked with Will towards the station, putting on a flat cap when light rain began to fall from the low unbroken clouds. The dismal, factual light looked to Will like something issued by the War Office. They walked together through the quiet coppice with the dogs snuffling at the ground and there they parted with a firm handshake. Will thought that Ed may have held onto his hand a fraction longer than necessary.
and said, ‘Let’s not be silly about this. I’ll probably be back before you know it. There’ll probably be some administrative delays. There generally are.’

Ed put his hands in his pockets and called the dogs. ‘It’s all delays for me.’

Will smiled. ‘Nice for Mother, though.’

Ed hitched an eyebrow, saying nothing, then called the dogs again. They gathered, breathing, at his feet. Will petted them a final time and Ed turned to go, the dogs following after in a wide swirling train. Will watched his brother vanishing and appearing through the trees, slightly hunched, the rain pattering on his cap. Ed was heading home, sinking back into his place. Then Will turned himself and headed towards the station, out into the world and the war, and he was glad to be going.