

## **Extracts from Goodnight Mister Tom, Chapter 17: Rescue**

### **Extract 1**

The small alcove stank of stale urine and vomit. A thin emaciated boy with matted hair and skin like parchment was tied to a length of copper piping. He held a small bundle in his arms. His scrawny limbs were covered with sores and bruises and he sat in his own excrement. He shrank at the light from the torch and made husky gagging noises. The warden reached out and touched him and he let out a frightened whimper. An empty baby's bottle stood by his legs.

"You give me that baby, son," said the warden, but the boy tightened himself up, his eyes wide with fear. Sammy slipped in between the warden's legs and sat patiently waiting for his master's command. Tom turned to the policeman.

"I'd like to talk to the boy. 'E knows me, like."

The policeman nodded and left to call an ambulance and to disperse the crowd of neighbours who were now massed outside the front door.

Tom squatted down.

"It's Mister Tom," he said gently. "I was worried about you, so me and Sammy cum lookin' for you."

Will looked in his direction.

"He'll have to go to the hospital," said the warden.

Will let out a cry.

"Don't worry, boy," said Tom reassuringly. "We'll stay with you. Now you jes' hang tight to that ole bundle and I'll untie you. This man's yer old school caretaker. He didn't know you was here and now he's goin' to help you git out. The light's on so's we can see the ropes more clear, like."

Very gently and laboriously he untied him. The warden, realizing that the boy looked calmer when the old man was by him, left him to it and watched.

Tom told him exactly what he was going to do. He knew that Will's limbs would be stiff and that they would be agony to move. He took hold of him firmly and manoeuvred him gently towards him. It was difficult because Will clung so tightly to the bundle.

After Tom had managed to ease him out, he heard an ambulance drawing up outside and the sound of doors opening and slamming. The policeman crouched down beside him and handed him a blanket. Tom wrapped it round Will and the bundle and carried him to the ambulance.

"The dog's mine," he said firmly to one of the ambulance men who was about to push Sammy out. "And I'm traveling with the boy."

The warden climbed in after him and sat on the free stretcher bed in the back. The doors were shut behind them and the ambulance ground slowly forward.

"I'd like to git me hands on that woman," the warden growled furiously. "All pride and angel pie on the outside, and inside this," and he pointed to Will, who was now lying on a stretcher in the warmth of Tom's overcoat.

"She must be orf 'er nut!"

Tom glanced at him. "I 'spose you'll be lookin' for her," he commented.

"Try and stop me!" The warden's pride had been shaken badly. It was embarrassing to have that policeman think he didn't know his job.

"Thank you," said Tom quietly.

"What for, guv?"

"For listenin' and breakin' in."

"Any time."

He gazed down at Will's face. A tiny speck of colour appeared in his jaundiced cheeks and he began to move his fingers. The warden looked intently at the bundle and then at Tom. Tom gave him a nod.

"Reckon we could find a blanket for the little un, like?" he asked.

The warden caught on immediately.

"I'm sure we could, Mr. Oakley," and he unfolded one of the blankets.

"William," whispered Tom. "Will." He opened his eyes and looked up at him.

"Yes," he whispered.

"Can I has a look at the little un?"

Will nodded and relaxed his fingers a fraction. Tom drew the folds of the cold bundle to one side. The baby had been dead for some time. It was thin and tinged with a greyish hue. He glanced at the warden. They didn't need to say anything. The look told all.

"I've just warmed this blanket up for the little chap," said the warden.

"It's a her," Will croaked.

"Oh, girl, is it? Wot's her name, then?"

"I calls her Trudy."

"Trudy. That's nice," and he leaned towards him. "You feel this nice soft blanket, Willie."

"I ent." He faltered. "I ent . . ."

"You ain't what?" he asked.

"I ent Willie."

The warden looked concerned.

"Shock," he whispered. "Must have gawn orf his chump."

"No," explained Tom. "We never called him Willie."

"Oh," said the warden, still not quite understanding.

"Will," whispered Tom. "Yeh."

"Well . . . Will," began the warden again. "How's abaht givin' ahr little Miss Trudy a blanket of her own, like yours."

Will nodded and relaxed his grip. "Hurts," he gasped as he attempted to move his arms.

"Takes yer own time," urged Tom. Will smiled as he recognized the familiar saying. "And keep breathin'. Sammy'll warm them arms, won't you, boy?"

Sammy was curled up by Will's legs. He stood alertly to his feet. Slowly Tom pried open Will's stiff arms, and with the help of the warden they took the baby and wrapped it carefully in the blanket.

Sammy was placed on Will's lap. Will jerked involuntarily. He was very sore. All he wore were the undershirt and pants that Miss Thorne's sister, May, had given him for his birthday. They were now a filthy grey and yellow. His bare feet were mauve with the cold and his filthy clawlike toenails curled inwards. Tom squeezed the feet with his hands to try and work some warmth into them. Will's stiff arms were now enfolding Sammy. Suddenly holding a warm body instead of the cold one he had just handed over made him aware that something was wrong with the baby. He glanced urgently across at the warden, who was holding her.

"It's all right, son," he said. "I got her."

"Hurts," he whispered. "My arms. They hurt."

"They will do for a bit," said Tom. "You been holdin' 'em in the same position for a long time. They ent used to movin' yet." The ambulance jerked to a halt and the doors were flung open. Tom carried Will out, followed by Sammy and the warden. They pushed their way through two heavy doors, into a lobby. A woman with glasses sat behind a small glass window. She looked up at them briefly as they sat down on some chairs.

"I'm sorry," she said. "No dogs allowed in here."

"Ent there somewhere I can leave him?" inquired Tom.

"I'm afraid not. He'll have to go."

The warden stood up and exchanged a few words with her.

"I see," she said, looking at Tom and Will. "There are some railings at the side of the hospital. You could tie him to one of those. I'm sure no one would disturb him."

"Tie 'im!" exclaimed Tom.

"Afraid that's the best they can do, Mr. Oakley," said the warden.

A cleaner bustled past them. She stopped.

"Cheer up, luvs," she said with a jolly smile. "It ain't the end of the world. You'll be all right here. They looks after you real proper."

Will and Tom stared blankly at her as she disappeared jovially down the corridor, singing "Wish Me Luck as You Wave Me Good-Bye."

A young man in a white coat came flying out of one of the doors in the corridor, followed rapidly by a nurse, and walked towards the warden and Tom. The young man glanced at the bundle.

"Dead," he said abruptly.

"Dead," whimpered Will.

"Dead cold he means, don't you, sir," said the warden, winking urgently at the doctor and indicating the boy.

"Oh, yes," said the young man. He was exhausted and hadn't realized that the boy and the baby were together. He knelt down by Will and drew aside the coat and blankets. The nurse, a dark-haired fresh-faced woman who didn't look more than nineteen, knelt down beside him. The doctor mumbled something about lacerations and delousing. He looked up at Tom. "You a relative?" Tom shook his head.

The warden spoke up for him. He knew how strict regulations were about not allowing visitors who weren't relatives.

"The boy stayed wiv him for six months in the country. He went back home to his mother, who said she was ill. He ain't got no dad, you see, and this gentleman heard no word so he comes miles to find him. Mother's left the boy."

"Looks like he found you in the nick of time," said the nurse, and she gave Will a warm smile. The doctor stood up.

"Best take him to the children's ward and clean him up. Bit late for stitches. He'd better have a tetanus jab."

"That an injection?" asked Tom anxiously.

"Yes. Nothing to worry about. It's in case of infection."

"Good clean air'll cure that," said Tom.

"Nurse," said the doctor, ignoring him, "take him to children's."

Tom stood up with Will still in his arms.

"Dogs aren't allowed," said the nurse, glancing down at Sammy, who still stood alertly by Tom's side.

"It's all right," piped up the warden. "I'll look after him."

"I'll come with you," said Tom to the nurse.

"I'm afraid that's not allowed," she said. "I ent leavin' the boy

with a load of strangers."

She gave a sigh.

"You can come as far as the ward but no farther. You'll have me for the high jump, you will."

## **Extract 2**

It was dawn by the time he had sat down in the lobby. Three ambulances had driven up with casualties and he had given the ambulance men and nurses a hand. A communal shelter had collapsed on fifty men, women and children. Tom helped load and unload the stretchers.

By the afternoon there was still no word of Will and no answer to Tom's repeated questioning. He continued to sit patiently in the lobby, alternately dozing and going out to see Sammy.

At last a fair-haired nurse came up to him.

"Are you Mr. Tom?" she asked.

"Yes," he said, standing abruptly. "How is he? Can I see him?"

"You're not a relative, are you?"

"No, but I'm pretty near—the boy lived with me, like. He ent got no father and his mother's deserted him."

"A psychiatrist has been to see him, Mr. Tom. He's from a special children's home and he's agreed that it's all right for you to see him."

"Sichitrus? 'Ow d'you mean?"

"A man who cares for sick minds."

"Oh yes. I read about them somewhere," and he grunted. "Nothin' sick about his mind, though."

"He's under deep psychological shock," said the nurse. "He keeps suddenly screaming out for no apparent reason. We've had to keep sedating him."

"Sedatin' him?"

"Putting him to sleep."

"Why?"

"To stop him from screaming."

"Mebbe he needs to."

"That's as may be, Mr. Tom, but we have to consider the other children in the ward."

Tom nodded. The sooner Will could get out into some wide-open fields, the better.

"When can I see him?"

"Now. Follow me."

They passed through the maze of corridors. Since Tom had helped with the emergency, he had begun to learn his way around. Two nurses nodded and smiled at him. They thought he was a volunteer helper.

The fair-haired nurse pushed aside the swing doors into the children's ward. Tom strode in and looked around. She pointed to a bed on his left. The first one by the door. Accessible. Easy to get to in an emergency— although why he felt that was important he had no idea.

Will was propped up by pillows. His hair had been shorn off completely, revealing an array of multicoloured cuts and bruises around his bald skull. He was well scrubbed and smelled strongly of disinfectant. Sitting in a voluminous white hospital nightshirt, he appeared quite shrunken.

"Didn't recognize you with yer army cut," said Tom.

Will smiled weakly. His teeth were still the same yellowy-brown colour.

"How you feelin'?"

"Stiff."

His lips were pale and cracked and it was obviously an effort to speak.

"I gits nightmares," he whispered. "And when I wakes up they stick a needle in me and then I can't move or speak." He fell back exhausted onto the pillows. "How long does I have to stay here?" he croaked.

"Not long, I shouldn't think. You look well patched up." He felt Will's thin fingers. They were cold. He gave them a blow and rubbed them between his hands. Picking up his haversack from the floor, he slung it onto the bed. "Got a new pair of gloves fer them hands," he said. "Had a feelin' you might be needin' them. You'll has to put on a bit more flesh though, else they'll slide off."

"Where's Sammy?"

"Outside. Regulations. Not allowed in. Case he brings in germs, I s'pose." He glanced around the ward. "Though I reckon there's more germs in this here hospital than most places." He gave a gruff laugh.

Will leaned awkwardly on one elbow.

"This bloke came to see me."

"Oh yes. Doctor, was 'e?"

"I dunno. He said he was from a home and that I'd be goin' there and I'd get better there." He clutched at Tom's arm. "Can't I come back with you?"

"Course you can. Don't know the law side, mind, but we'll git round it somehow."

"Mr. Tom," interrupted the fair-haired nurse from behind him. "I'm afraid you'll have to leave now."

Will hung tightly to Tom's sleeve. "Don't go yet!" he urged.

"Stay a bit more."

Tom sat closer to him on the bed.

"I'm sorry, Mr. Tom," said the nurse nervously. "But you must go now."

"The boy would like me to stay for a bit," he replied calmly.

"I'm sorry, it's against regulations."

"Whose regulations?" Tom said, turning to face her.

"Now come on, Mr. Tom, let's not have any trouble."

"What's going on, nurse?" boomed a loud noise at the end of the ward.

"Nothing, sister," said the nurse shakily.

The sister, a middle-aged woman with a loud step, walked firmly down the ward towards them.

"Time to go!" she said in a no-nonsense manner.

Tom stood up and leaned over Will's bed.

"Afraid I'll have to go, but I'll be in the hallway and I'll see you tomorrow."

Will clung to his arm with both hands now. He could barely sound the words. "Don't go," he pleaded. "Don't go!"

"Please leave, sir," said the sister sharply. "You're only upsetting the boy."

"I think it's your regulations what's upsettin' him, ma'am." He turned to Will.

"Tomorrow'll come awful quick," he added comfortingly.

### **Extract 3**

Three hours later he was walking back down one of the stairways, carrying a blanket, when he realized that he was standing outside the children's ward. He peered quickly through the small window. The fair-haired nurse was still on duty. She was slumped asleep across a table with a small night light beside her.

Tom looked quickly around the corridor. There was no one in sight. Before he allowed himself time to think, he crept into the ward and gently eased the swing doors to a close. Will was fast asleep, well knocked out by the drugs.

As Tom drew the sheets aside, one of the smaller children on the other side of the ward woke up and started coughing. The nurse opened her eyes and lifted her head. Tom hastily pulled the sheets back into place and crouched down on the floor. The nurse spoke to the child soothingly, gave her some medicine and tucked her in. She then returned to the table. She was trying to study for an exam on anatomy, but soon her eyelids grew heavy again and within minutes she had fallen asleep.

Tom whipped back the sheets, lifted Will out and wrapped the blanket he was carrying around him. He stuck one of the pillows down the bed and tucked the sheets round it. Not very convincing, but it was all he had time for. Holding Will firmly in his arms he stood up. If the nurse woke up now, he thought, he'd be in for it. One of the children turned over in his sleep and gave a little moan but the nurse went on sleeping, quite undisturbed. He glanced out the window. Very quickly, he swung the door open and walked firmly out and down the corridor. He knew that if he looked furtive he would give the game away. He met the nurse who had chatted to him over the elderly man. She smiled at him.

"It's all go, isn't it?" she said.

Tom nodded and headed for the lobby, where he had left his haversack. Two ambulances drew in, and in the general confusion that followed he picked up the haversack and strode towards the swing doors. He glanced quickly at the receptionist. To his relief, it was a different woman on duty. As soon as he was outside, and the drivers had turned their backs, he ran into the dark unlit courtyard, round the corner and down to where he had left Sammy.

Sammy leaped up excitedly and began to bark. "No!" whispered Tom urgently, placing a firm finger on his nose. "Down, boy. Quiet!"

He laid Will on the bottom step and feverishly undid the haversack. Quickly he put some warm underwear and socks on him.

"You keep guard, Sammy," he whispered, and he untied him and put the leash into his pocket. The next garments to go on Will were a brown patched pair of corduroy shorts, a grey flannel shirt, a navy roll-neck jersey and a green balaclava. The balaclava at least hid his bald head. Unfortunately he had no boots or overcoat for him. He hid the blanket in a dark corner and wrapped his own overcoat round Will. Slinging the haversack onto his back, he walked towards the open courtyard with Will in his arms, Sammy following. A firm step, he thought to himself as he strode across it. At any moment they might discover Will's absence. He continued out through the gates and down the street.