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We'll Meet Again

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Extract

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CHAPTER ONE

January 1953

IT SEEMED to be a day like any other. Windy, certainly, but at Marsh Edge Farm they were used to almost constant wind, exposed as they were. It swept over the Essex flatlands with increasing power that day, the last day of January in the year of the new Queen's coronation. It came howling across the low grasslands that had once been part of the sea, raced over the snaking sea wall and buffeted the grey North Sea into angry white-topped waves.

It whipped the skirts of Annie Cross's old grey mac round her frozen legs as she brought the dairy cows in for evening milking. She pulled her muffler more snugly round her neck and looked round anxiously at her small son. Bobby was plodding behind the last animal, stick in hand, the clinging mud nearly to the top of his wellingtons. His small face was pinched and his nose was streaming. In the gap between his raincoat and his boots, his bare knees were bright red with cold. Annie forced an encouraging smile.

'Nearly there, darling! Grandma's making us some scones for tea. That'll be nice, won't it?'

Bobby nodded and sneezed, and wiped his nose on his

sleeve. Annie's heart contracted. He shouldn't be out here in the wind and the cold. He should be indoors in front of the kitchen range, being cosseted by his grandma. But cosseting was out of the question at Marsh Edge Farm.

Her father was waiting for them in the yard. A small man, Walter Cross watched their arrival from beneath the peak of his cloth cap, his eyes hard in his narrow face.

'You took your time. What's the matter with you? Having a holiday?'

Annie shook her head. It wasn't a question that required answering.

'You'll have to do the milking. I still haven't got that blasted tractor to work. Don't know what you've gone and done to it,' her father said.

'Right,' Annie said.

It was no use pointing out that the tractor had failed while he'd been driving it. After all, everything that went wrong round here was her fault. Hers or Bobby's.

'And make sure that brat of yours helps. Cold, indeed! I never heard the like. Never got colds in my day. Get the little bastard working. That'll soon cure him.'

Walter glared in the direction of the child, who stood in the yard entrance, his frightened eyes flicking from his mother to his grandfather. Walter grunted.

'Bad blood,' he muttered.

Annie's self-control snapped. 'He's your grandson!'

Her father's mouth stretched into a grim smile. He had provoked her. Satisfied, he turned to trudge across the yard to where the tractor stood under an open-sided shelter.

'Make sure it's all scrubbed down proper after. No skiving off early. I'll be checking to see you've done it right, mind,' he warned over his shoulder.

Annie said nothing. Walter stopped and slowly looked back at her. Behind her, Annie heard Bobby give a small whimper of fear.

'You heard what I said?' he demanded.

'Yes, Dad.'

'Good.'

His absolute authority assured, Walter walked on.

'Pig,' Annie muttered under her breath. 'Bully. *Schweinhund*.'

She had learnt that one from the pictures. It gave her particular pleasure. She repeated it with as guttural a German accent as she could manage.

At least the milking was inside. Annie and Bobby went about the well-worn routine—feeding, washing udders, fixing on the cups. Without Walter there criticising their every move, they could almost enjoy it. Bobby sniffed and sneezed but worked manfully. He was only seven, but he was a well-seasoned assistant.

'When I was little,' Annie told him, 'we did all this by hand. It took ages, even though we didn't have so many cows then.'

Like Bobby, she had had to help from an early age. She could hardly remember a time when she hadn't laboured on the farm.

'Did they like you doing it by hand?' Bobby asked. 'The cows?'

Annie thought about it.

'Yes. I think so. But you had to do it properly, or they'd kick you, or knock the bucket over.'

'I bet *he* didn't like that.'

'No, he didn't.'

The long day wasn't yet over. The cows had to be turned

into their pens and the dairy scrubbed down. Then there were the pigs to feed and hens to shut up for the night. By the time they had finished, Bobby's teeth were chattering. Annie fished a handkerchief out of her pocket and held it over his nose.

'Blow,' she told him.

He blew.

'That feel better?'

He nodded.

Annie put an arm round his shoulders and gathered him to her. He hugged her hips, nestling his balaclaved head against her. She glanced over to where her father was still leaning over the tractor engine with a spanner in his hand. She knew better than to go in without clearing it with him.

'We're finished, Dad,' she called across the yard.

He didn't let them go in straight away, but that was normal. Instead he found fault in their cleaning of the milking parlour. But when that was finally done to his satisfaction, they all went inside.

Marsh Edge farmhouse was a square plain brick building with a parlour, large kitchen, a scullery and an outside toilet downstairs and two large and two small bedrooms upstairs. The only room in the house that was heated was the kitchen, and it was there that they lived. It was hardly a model of comfort. The floors were stone-flagged, the walls whitewashed. A wooden sink and some shelves were built under the window, a green-painted dresser and some deal cupboards stood against one of the walls, a plain scrubbed table occupied the middle of the room with four stick-back chairs round it, while two Windsor carver chairs and a settle were set round the rag rug in front of the blackleaded range. The only clues that this was 1953 rather than 1903

were the big brown wireless on top of one of the cupboards, and the single electric light bulb under its red shade in the centre of the room.

Plain as it was, the kitchen seemed a haven of light and warmth after the raw cold of the yard. Annie and Bobby left their macs and wellingtons in the porch and washed their hands in the scullery. Edna Cross welcomed them in.

'You poor things; you must be frozen. How's my poor boy? That cold any better? Here, come and get warm by the range. I'll open the front up…'

Edna was an older version of her daughter, small and round-faced with a turned-up nose, but years of hard work, poor health and marriage to Walter had etched lines into her pretty face, and made her painfully thin rather than slender. Her narrow hands were red and rough and the hair that had once been fair and naturally wavy was limp and colourless. She had long ago given up any idea of being anything but a drudge.

'Is he coming?' she asked Annie, with a motion of her head towards the yard.

'I think so.'

'I'll do the toast, then. Can you make the tea, love?'

Annie shifted the big black kettle from where it was simmering on the side of the range to the hot spot in the middle, while her mother threaded a thick slice of bread on to the toasting fork. Bobby crouched on the rug, warming himself like a cat.

'He got that tractor fixed?' Edna asked.

'Not yet.'

Neither of them made any further comment. It went without saying that his failure would not improve Walter's temper. Edna's hand shook a little as she held the toasting fork.

Walter came in and the meal was put on the table—toast and dripping followed by scones and gooseberry jam, washed down by plenty of tea. The lack of conversation was disguised by the measured voices of the BBC announcers on the *Home Service.*

The evening passed like a hundred others. Annie put Bobby to bed and then sat by the range knitting him some socks. Walter read the local paper with the odd comment on the stupidity of one person or another while Edna handworked buttonholes in a rayon blouse for one of her customers. They listened to *Saturday Night Theatre* on the wireless. The weather forecast warned of continuing gales.

'There's a spring tide tonight and all,' Walter said.

Edna looked fearful.

'Spring tide and a gale? Will we be safe?'

'Don't talk daft, woman,' Walter scoffed. 'Wind's offshore. If anyone gets it, it'll be them Dutchies. Very lowlying, Holland is. Much more'n here.'

Annie made cocoa and put the porridge pot to simmer on the range, then there was the ritual of locking up before they went upstairs. Annie undressed as quickly as possible in her freezing bedroom and put on a flannelette nightie that came up to her neck and down to her ankles while on her feet she wore woolly socks.

Before getting into bed, she held back the curtain and took a quick peep outside. Way across the fields was the dark line of the sea wall, the place where she had met Tom, all those years ago when they had both been hardly more than kids. She pulled her mind away. It was no use dwelling on Tom. Under the sea wall, a light shone in a window, bringing a smile to her face. The light meant love and cheerfulness and hope. It came from Silver Sands, the little wooden chalet

where her dear friends Reggie and Gwen lived, surrounded by the half dozen caravans that they insisted were going to make their fortune one day soon. While Reggie and Gwen were there, her life had a bright spot in it. She sent them a goodnight blessing. Then she climbed into the iron bedstead with its lumpy mattress and curled into a ball round her stone hot water bottle, gradually extending her feet down the bed as it warmed up.

Tired out from a long day working in the cold wind, she fell deeply asleep, only to be woken some time later out of a confused dream. Somewhere out in the yard, a door was banging. It was still a wild night out there. Wide awake and anxious about her friends, Annie slid out of bed and padded across the dark room to the window. Gwen was expecting a baby any day now. What if it had chosen tonight to arrive? What if Reggie's car, never very reliable, refused to start? She drew back the thin curtain and looked out once more. The sky had cleared and a bright moon shone down, silvering the marshes, glinting off—water! Annie caught her breath, not wanting to believe her eyes. There was a lake where the lower meadows should be. The fields were flooding.

She stared through the night, trying to make out what was happening, trying to distinguish the solid bulk of the wall, their only protection from the North Sea. She could see the pale glimmer of Reggie and Gwen's caravans crouching under where it should be.

'My God! Gwen!' she cried out loud.

If the water was coming over the wall, Reggie and Gwen were right in its path.

She blundered for the door, feeling for the light switch. Nothing happened. She flicked it up and down. Still nothing.

'Damn, damn.'

She stumbled across the landing and banged on her parents' bedroom door.

'Dad, Mum! Wake up! The water's coming over the wall! There's a flood!'

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