

The Journey

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Extract

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CHAPTER ONE

Salford, Bedfordshire

HE HAD SEEN them twice before, and each time his curiosity was aroused. Arm-in-arm, the two women would come softly into the churchyard, place their flowers, and linger awhile before leaving in the same discreet manner in which they had arrived.

Today, as his bumbling black Labrador Chuck tugged on the lead, the dog's nostrils twitching at the secret scent of rabbits in the churchyard, the women came again. He tried not to seem interested, but the moment they walked through the gate and passed him by, he could not stop himself from sneaking a glance. They acknowledged him with a polite nod of the head, then moved on, intent about their business. It was almost as if he was not there.

In her own way, each of the women was beautiful. The taller of the two, who looked about fifty, had long chestnut-brown hair, grey in places, tied back with a ribbon, and lovely golden-brown eyes, a smart though ample figure and softly rounded features. Today, the bouquet of evergreens cradled in her arm seemed to accentuate her beauty; though it was not a virgin beauty, for the crippling seasons of time and emotion were deeply etched in her face.

She walked with a stick, long and slender with bone handle

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and silver-capped toe. It was obvious that she was crippled in some slight way, though this did not detract from her air of dignity and sense of purpose. With her sombre bearing and her carefully-measured steps, she made a striking figure.

He knew they were headed for the same headstone, where he himself had paused many times. In the shape of a cross, the headstone was small and nondescript, yet the words written there were so powerful, they raised that humble stone above all others. The words, carved deep, read:

BARNEY DAVIDSON

1890–1933

*A MAN OF COURAGE.
HE MADE THE GREATEST
SACRIFICE OF ALL.*

Having read the inscription and been intrigued by it, Ben knew it off by heart. It had set his thoughts alight with all manner of questions. What had this man done to deserve such an accolade? What did the words mean? And who had ordered them to be inscribed? Somehow, he didn't think it had anything to do with the heroism of war. This Barney Davidson would have been twenty-four when World War One broke out – and no doubt the young man had played his part – but he had died well before the second lot.

His attention was drawn to the two women.

With such tenderness that it took him aback, the older one stroked the tips of her fingers over the dead man's name. Her voice broke with pride as she murmured, 'Oh, my dearest Barney.' In that moment when she lifted her gaze to the heavens, her brown eyes glittered with tears. So much pain, he thought. So much emotion.

He sensed that, somewhere deep inside, she carried a

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terrible burden. What was that old saying? ‘The eyes are the mirror of the soul.’ He wondered what sorrowful secrets were hers.

The man’s discreet gaze went now to the younger woman. Smaller, with a neat, if slightly plump figure, her fair hair was bobbed to the shoulders, and even from where he stood, he could see that her pretty eyes were the deepest shade of blue lavender. He imagined that normally, those eyes were quick to smile – but not today. Today her concerned gaze was trained on the older woman.

The two visitors were sensibly dressed. Like himself, each wore a long coat and sturdy shoes, for the weather had been foul of late, and in places the ground underfoot was treacherous.

In the early hours of this January Sunday in 1952, ditches and paths had run high with the melting remnants of a heavy snowfall. By midday the wind had heightened and now, judging by the darkening skies, it seemed a new storm was gathering.

‘Here, Chuck. Here, boy!’ he said in a harsh whisper, and tugged on the leash, quickly bringing the dog to heel. In a burst of affection, the animal jumped up and licked him, nearly sending him flying. Recovering, he patted the dog, then set off for the lych-gate and home.

He was only a few strides away from Barney Davidson’s tomb when the women left it and began walking on, merely an arm’s reach in front of him. Slowing his step, he continued to follow, the dog plodding obediently at his side.

They were almost at the gate when the older woman’s stick slipped in the mud and she fell heavily, seeming to twist her leg as she did so.

When her young companion cried out and immediately began struggling to bring her upright, he ran forward. ‘Please . . . let me help?’ Sliding his two hands under the

older one's arms, he gently hoisted her up. When she seemed steady, he let go, recovered her walking stick and handed it to her. 'No real harm done, I hope?' he said politely.

'Thank you.' Her dark eyes appraised him. 'As you can see, I'm not as agile as I once was.'

A softer voice interrupted. 'Yes, thank you, Mr . . . ?' The young woman frowned. 'How can we thank you properly, when we don't know your name?'

His warm gaze enveloped her pretty face. 'The name's Ben,' he revealed. 'Benjamin Morris.' Holding out his hand in greeting, he was pleasantly surprised and thrilled when she put her small hand in his. Surprised, because he found her grip firm and strong, as though she worked with her hands in some way. Thrilled because she seemed to hold on just that moment longer than necessary.

Having witnessed his reaction, the older woman gave a pleasant laugh. 'My daughter Mary has a strong grip for a little one, don't you think?'

Mary tried to explain. 'It comes from gardening,' she said shyly. 'A few years ago our old gardener retired, and rather than take on someone new, I persuaded Mother to let me have a go at the job.' Her face flushed with pleasure. 'It's hard work, mind, but I love every minute of it.'

'Mary is a worker, all right,' her mother declared. 'When she's not up to her eyes in the garden, she works five days a week in her flower-shop in Leighton Buzzard, and whenever the chance arises, she's out and about delivering the flowers herself, driving the shop-van.' Tutting, she finished quietly, 'I don't know where she finds the energy!'

'A busy lady then?' Ben looked down into that bright lively face and wondered why she was not married. 'And may I ask what you do in this garden of yours?'

It was the mother who answered. 'She spends every spare

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minute she's got in it, that's what she does!' From the reproachful glance she gave Mary, it was apparent that she thought her daughter should be enjoying her life and doing other things while she was still young. 'She grows all our own produce,' she said proudly, 'and she's completely redesigned the garden, made it into a little paradise with delightful walkways and colourful blossom round every corner, except,' she glanced at the ominous skies, 'of course, on days like this.'

'Then it sounds like time well spent,' Ben commented. He wondered why it was that Mary spent every spare minute in the garden. Did she never go out? Was she never approached by men who would like to enjoy her company? She was such a fetching little thing, *he* certainly wouldn't mind the opportunity to get to know her better.

'Oh, but the garden is so lovely!' That was the mother talking again. 'She's even managed to carve out a number of little nooky holes – quiet places where you can escape the weather and enjoy your own company.'

The younger woman's soft voice intervened. 'I just thought it would be nice to have a quiet place where you could hide from the rest of the world.' Blushing under her mother's lavish praise, Mary made an effort to divert attention from herself. 'Do you like gardening, Mr Morris?'

For a long moment he gazed down on her, his heart turning over like never before. 'Why would you want to hide from the rest of the world?' he asked, ignoring her question.

Mary had not expected him to answer with a question of his own. 'Isn't that what we all sometimes need?' she asked cagily.

He wasn't sure how to respond to that, so he didn't. Instead he went back to her original question. 'I farm,' he answered lamely. 'I'm afraid there isn't a great deal of leisurely time left for gardening, or much else.'

Her smile was appreciative. 'In a way, farming could be called gardening, only on a larger scale . . . don't you think?'

'If you say so.' When those lavender-blue eyes beamed as they did now, her whole face seemed to light up.

'Well, I never!' With a quick, mischievous smile on her face, the older woman reminded them, 'There's me badly injured, and you two exchanging pleasantries as if I wasn't even here.'

The pair of them were mortified. 'Whatever am I thinking of!' Ben exclaimed. 'I'm so sorry.' He had been so occupied with the daughter, he had neglected the mother, and he was ashamed.

'I must get Mother home.' With her eyes still on Ben, Mary shifted closer to the older lady. 'I don't know what I would have done if you hadn't been here just now.'

She had seen this stranger before, striding down the streets of Salford with his faithful dog in tow as she drove past in her van. Discreetly taking stock of him now that he was here, close beside her, she liked what she saw. Handsome, of manly build, with dark, expressive eyes, he seemed to be taken with her, and it was strange, but she felt oddly drawn to him.

'I'm glad to have been of help.' He wondered how he could sound so calm with his heart thumping fifteen to the dozen.

He glanced at the older woman and caught the glint in her smiling eyes; he realised she was taking everything in. He gestured at her ankle. 'From the look of it, I don't think you've broken anything.'

She nodded. 'It's probably just a sprain. Once I get home and put my feet up, I'll be right as rain.'

'It's best you don't put too much weight on that foot.' Pointing across the fields, to the rambling, white-washed house in the distance, he informed them, 'Far Crest Farm,

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that's where I live. I'll help you up there, shall I, to take a look at the ankle and see what can be done.'

Sensing their reluctance, he quickly added, 'Or, if you'd prefer, I could nip up and get my car and take you home. It's only a few minutes to the farmhouse.'

The older woman thanked him. 'Don't think I'm not grateful.' She had a natural friendliness in her manner that warmed him to her. 'But I'll be well taken care of. Look there?' Gesturing to the long dark car that waited by the kerbside outside the church, she revealed, 'I have a car and driver waiting.'

Flustered, Ben apologised. 'Oh, I'm sorry. I didn't realise . . .'

'How could you?' Her smile deepened. 'I might be a frail old biddy walking with the aid of a stick, but as you see, I'm not short of a bob or two.'

Ben smiled. 'You don't strike me as a frail old biddy,' he remarked, holding open the lych-gate for the two women to pass through it. 'In fact, I imagine if anyone got on the wrong side of you, they might rue the day.'

The girl Mary had to smile at his comment. 'You're absolutely right. What you see is not always what you get.' She gave her mother a curious glance. 'Still waters run deep, isn't that what they say?'

The older woman nodded but said nothing, though her gaze roamed back to the headstone, and the name *Barney*.

He had been a man amongst men, she thought. A man of such bravery it made her humble. Even now after all these years her heart wept for him, and for the unbearable torment he had endured, all in the name of love.

'Oh, look! Here comes Adam now.' As the driver approached to help her down the pavement, she reached out and shook Ben by the hand. 'You've been very kind, Mr Morris. Thank you again.'

Leaning on the arm of her driver, she set off for the comfort of the big car, calling as she went, 'By the way, my name is Lucy.' She had taken a liking to this young fella me lad and, from the look on her daughter's face, she suspected Mary had done the same.

'Goodbye then,' Ben replied. 'Take care of yourself.'

'Not goodbye,' Mary said hopefully. 'I'm sure our paths will cross again.'

He smiled into her eyes. There was so much he would have liked to say, but not now. Maybe not ever, he thought sadly.

In a moment the women were gone, and he felt lonely, as never before. Retracing his footsteps to the simple headstone, he read out the inscription. *'He made the greatest sacrifice of all . . .'*

The words burned in his soul. 'Barney Davidson . . .' he mused aloud. 'Lucy's husband, maybe? Her brother?' Somehow he didn't think so. His curiosity heightened. 'What great sacrifice did you make, Barney?' he wondered.

Deep in thought, he almost leaped out of his skin when a quiet voice said over his shoulder, 'Barney was Lucy's husband – died soon after they moved here. And as for the inscription . . . I've wondered that myself, many a time.'

Swinging round, Ben came face to face with the new vicar, the Reverend Michael Gray. 'Oh, it's you, Vicar!' He greeted the older man with a sheepish grin. 'I don't usually make a habit of talking to myself,' he explained, 'but I must admit, I *am* curious.'

'You know what they say about a man who talks to himself?' In his late fifties, balding and bespectacled, Mike Gray had the hang-dog look of a man with the weight of the world on his shoulders. And yet his smile was heavenly.

When he began walking towards the gate, Ben went with him. 'As you know, I've only been here a matter of a few

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months,' the vicar went on to remind him, 'but like you, I'm intrigued by that grave.'

'Maybe you should ask the ladies?' Ben suggested. 'I'm sure they wouldn't mind it coming from you – I mean, you being their vicar here at Saint Andrew's.'

Mike Gray shook his head. 'There have been times when I was sorely tempted to ask,' he confessed, and slid a finger round to loosen his dog-collar. 'Then I felt I might be intruding, so I thought it best to wait, at least until I know them a little better. They've been worshipping here for around twenty years, I believe. But of course, the war has occupied everyone's thoughts, and that tombstone is old history now.'

'You're probably right,' Ben replied. 'All the same, it's a curious thing, an inscription like that.'

'Yes. As you say, a curious thing.' The Reverend paused to stroke Chuck's glossy head. 'Our man obviously did something out of the ordinary.' His features crinkled into a wry little smile. 'It's to be hoped we might all of us aspire to great things before we're called.' Raising his gaze to the skies, he gave a long, deep sigh. 'Sadly, a lot of poor devils had to be heroes in the war, whether they wanted to, or not. The truth of it is, most of us simply do not have greatness in us.'

By the time they reached the gate, the men had covered every possibility. 'Maybe he saved a life by forfeiting his own?' Ben speculated.

'Mmm.' The vicar nodded. 'Or he may have shown true bravery during the Great War. Certainly his age suggests he could well have been called up to serve his country.'

Ben considered that. 'Could be.'

Pausing in his stride, Mike Gray glanced back towards the headstone, now dim in the failing light. 'Whatever that inscription means,' he declared soundly, 'we can assume that our Barney Davidson was a remarkable man.'

Hearing a scuffle behind a great yew that stood near the vestry, Chuck suddenly slipped his lead and raced off. While Ben called him back, the vicar had spotted a dark object lying on the ground. He stooped to pick it up. 'Well, I never!' He wiped off the smears of dirt and dampness with the cuff of his sleeve.

A knowing smile creased his face. 'This must belong to one of our ladies,' he said. 'Maybe, if you were to return this, you might be privileged to discover the true nature of that inscription?'

'Mary's mother must have dropped it when she fell over earlier. I would gladly deliver the handbag.' Ben recalled the young woman and those pretty lavender-blue eyes. It would be good to see her again, he thought. 'Only I don't know where they live.'

'Couldn't be easier. They live at Knudsdén House – you must know the place,' the Reverend Gray prompted. 'I recall admiring it when I came into the village for the first time. It's that big Edwardian house, with the large, beautifully kept gardens. You can't miss it.'

Ben *had* seen the place. An architect by training, he took a keen interest in the buildings around him. 'Of course!' he cried. 'It's the one set back from the lane, behind tall iron gates.' He shook his head in disbelief. 'I would never have guessed they lived there.' Somehow, despite the elegant walking stick, and the chauffeur-driven car, he had pictured the women living in a large rambling cottage, with thatched roof and roses growing at the door.

The vicar remarked thoughtfully, 'According to my housekeeper, Knudsdén house used to belong to the village squire; he passed on some twenty years ago, and the house was put up for sale.'

Taking a moment to recall his housekeeper's exact words, he went on, 'It was then bought by Mr Davidson and his

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wife. Their daughter Mary was just an infant at the time. They were a family who preferred to keep themselves very much to themselves.'

There was a silence as Ben digested all of this information.

The vicar added thoughtfully, 'For a long time they rarely ventured out. In recent years though, they have concerned themselves more with the community, and have given generously to any good cause; the daughter with her time and labour, and the mother with cash donations.'

'Hmh! For someone who knows very little about the family, you seem to have gathered a fair amount of information.'

'So I have.' The vicar had surprised himself. 'Don't forget, I have my spies,' he said wryly. 'My housekeeper comes from a long line of gossips who've lived in this village since time began, so it goes without saying that what she doesn't know isn't worth knowing. Mind, the dead are good at keeping secrets – and even she doesn't know the answer to the mystery of that inscription.'

When the Labrador bounded up, Ben grabbed his lead and wound it around his wrist. He shivered. The temperature had dropped, almost while they were talking.

'And what about the daughter?' Ben asked. 'Did she attend the village school?'

'No. Mary was educated at home. A tutor arrived each morning and departed every afternoon.' The vicar's voice dropped to a whisper. 'It must have been a very lonely life for a little girl.'

Ben was thinking the very same, and his heart went out to her. 'So, as far as you know, she never made friends?'

'From what I'm given to understand, the daughter has no close friends, but she does get on very well with the two women who help them out. Elsie Langton does a bit of housekeeping. Her married daughter Rona works in the

flower-shop. Mary is closer to Rona, which is understandable when they're at the shop together most days.'

Ben had heard the name. 'Is that the same Langton who keeps the smithy on the farm adjoining mine?'

'That's the father. He doesn't own the farm, I know that much, but he makes a reasonable living, what with his smithy and the market-gardening. The Langton family are closer to the Davidsons than anyone else in the village.'

'What about the man who drives for them?'

Again, the vicar was able to satisfy his curiosity. 'Adam Chives is an old friend of Mrs Davidson's who comes from Liverpool. He's a quiet, well-liked man who lives in the cottage next to the big house.' He passed the handbag to Ben. 'I really must stop chatting and be on my way. I'll leave this with you, shall I?'

'I won't be able to return it straight away.' Ben took the handbag from him. 'I've got hungry animals to be fed.'

'Of course. I understand.' Having worked all his adult life in rural parishes, the vicar was familiar with the way of things. 'The animals don't know or care what day it is, they still need tending.' He gave a knowing nod. 'Much like my own flock, eh?'

Ben examined the handbag; it was an expensive-looking leather one. 'I wonder we didn't notice this on the ground before,' he remarked. 'I mean, you could hardly miss it, could you?'

The vicar agreed, but just then he spotted a small, round person calling his attention from the lane. 'That's Betty . . . my housekeeper,' he groaned. 'No doubt she's landed herself in another crisis. Last week she broke the new vacuum cleaner; the week before that she let the bathroom sink overflow and nearly flooded the Vicarage.'

He rolled his eyes heavenward. 'The Lord only knows what kind of chaos she's been up to now!'

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He waved a hand to let her know he was on his way. 'I'd best go,' he grumbled, 'before the house comes tumbling down round our ears!' His good-natured laugh told Ben he would probably forgive the housekeeper her latest mishap.

'What about the handbag?' Ben called after Mike Gray. 'What if it doesn't belong to them?'

'Then it will belong to someone else, I suppose,' the man turned and answered. 'But we won't know until you ask, will we? Just take the handbag with you. You can return it to Knudsen House, after you've seen to your animals.'

His wink was meaningful. 'Besides, I saw you and young Mary chatting, and if you don't mind me saying, I thought you made a right handsome pair. I'm sure she would be very pleased if you turned up on her front doorstep.'

Then he was away, rushing down the lane with a sense of urgency, following the small round person tripping on in front, shouting over her shoulder and seeming frantic about something or another.

Smiling to himself, Ben went on his way. A vicar's life wasn't as dull as he'd imagined. Then he thought about Mary, and his mood softened. The vicar was right: he and the girl *had* got on very well, though whether she really would be pleased to see him turn up on her doorstep was another matter altogether.

Away from the church-grounds and into open countryside, he set the dog loose. 'And don't go splashing through the brook!' he called after the big animal. 'I haven't got time to give you a bath today.' He had more important things to do. Uppermost in his mind was the proposed visit to Knudsen House.

Striding across the field, he kept a wary eye on the dog; when the Labrador took off after a rabbit, he called him back. 'Here, Chuck! Good boy.'

On his master's call, Chuck came bounding back, but was

soon off again at the sight of another dog being set loose across the field. Seeing the reason for his pet's excitement, Ben let him have his head, smiling at the sight of Chuck canoodling with the smaller, prettier animal. 'Casanova! Chase anything in a skirt, so you would,' he said aloud.

Covering the ground at a fast pace, he drew his coat tighter about him; the wind was getting up, the skies were darkening and the smell of storm was strong in the air. He called the dog to heel, but by now he was nowhere in sight. 'Chuck! Here, boy!' He scoured the landscape, and called again, but the dog was gone.

Ben was nearly home now. Quickening his steps, he made for the top of the rise. From there he had the world at his feet, and the dog in his sights. 'C'mon, fella!' But Chuck was too engrossed in dancing after his fancy piece. With a sterner voice Ben caught his attention. 'Here, boy!' he bellowed.

With ears pricked and head bent to the wind, the dog raced up the hill and was soon close to heel. A few minutes later the two of them were hurrying down the path to the farmhouse.



'I'm off now, Mr Morris.' The old man came through the field gate and clicked it shut. 'I shan't be sorry to get home,' he told Ben. 'It's turned real chilly all of a sudden.' Taking off his flat cap, he scratched his head and looked up to the skies. 'I reckon it's blowing up a real nasty storm.'

Ben agreed. 'You're right,' he observed. 'Mind how you go and I'll see you tomorrow.'

When Ben bought the farm, old Les had been part and parcel of the place. Ben had never regretted agreeing to keep him on because he was hardworking and reliable, a real treasure; besides which he had a cheery wife to keep,

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and a lazy good-for-nothing grandson, who showed up from time to time looking for a handout, and though he was more trouble than he was worth, poor old Les never turned him away.

‘I’ve stripped the tree-branches and brought them down,’ Les informed him now. ‘You’ll find them all stood up at the back of the barn, ready for chopping. By the time you’ve finished, there’ll be enough to keep the whole of Salford in firewood. Oh, and I’ve levelled that back field just as you asked – though you’ll need a new axle for the tractor. If you ask me it won’t last above another month at best.’

Quick to agree, Ben put a proposition to the old fella. ‘I think it’s time we had a new tractor altogether. What would you say to that, eh?’

The old man’s face lit up. ‘I’d say that were a blooming good idea!’

‘Right then. We’ll make arrangements to go and look at a few. Now get off home, Les, and take a well-earned rest.’

‘I could stay and help you with the animals if you like?’ From the moment he had shaken Ben’s hand, Les had recognised the good in him. His first impressions had proved right, for Ben was fair-minded, caring and generous, and though he had never worked on the land before he bought Far Crest Farm, he had taken to it like a duck to water.

‘The missus won’t mind,’ Les persisted. ‘Just say the word and I’ll be right behind you. We’ll have that lot fed in no time at all.’

Ben shook his head. ‘Thanks all the same, but I can manage well enough on my own.’

‘I’m not past it yet, I’ll have you know,’ the old man argued. ‘And it weren’t my fault that the boar took against me.’

‘I know you’re not past it. And I also know it wasn’t your fault that the boar took against you. But he did, and you

were almost killed, and I'm not prepared to take that chance again.'

Ben didn't want to hurt the old man's feelings, but if he hadn't managed to distract the boar that day, Les would have been killed for sure. As it was, he suffered a broken leg and had been left with a slight limp. Ben still felt guilty. 'Look, we've gone over all this time and again, and I won't change my mind,' he said gently, then: 'Besides, don't you think you do enough round here already?'

'I could do more, if only you'd let me.'

'There's no need, Les. The arrangement we have works very well. We do the ploughing and sowing between us. I keep the hedges down, you bring in the old branches, and I chop them up. With the help of casual work when the harvest is got in, this little farm runs like clockwork, so let's not spoil a good thing, eh?'

The old man shrugged. 'If you say so, Mr Morris.'

'I do, but don't think I'm not grateful for the offer. I'll let you into a secret, shall I? I enjoy feeding the animals.' He grinned. 'They've begun to think I'm their mummy.'

The old man laughed. 'You certainly have a way with 'em, I'll say that for yer.' He pulled the neb of his cap down over his forehead. 'If yer sure then, I'd best make tracks. I expect the missus will have the tea on the table and the kettle already singing away.'

Before they parted, Ben assured him quietly, 'Les – you do know I could never manage this place without you?'

That brought a smile to the old farmhand's face, for he was well aware of how Ben Morris had bypassed younger, stronger men in order to keep him in work. 'You're a good man, Mr Morris, God bless you.' With that he was quickly gone, away down the path, off to the village, and home to his darling woman.



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For the next couple of hours, Ben was kept busy. He had a tried and tested feeding routine; despite this, it was not only a dirty job but a time-consuming one, too. There were two hundred chickens in the hen-house; twenty fat porkers in the pig-pens; the same number of milking cows in the small barn, and a small flock of thirty sheep in the big barn.

Feeding them all took between two and three hours in the morning and the same at night, and when they were let loose in the fields, all the barns and sheds had to be mucked out, ready for when the weather turned and the animals were brought back in again.

As he went inside the farmhouse, Ben gave a sigh of relief. He had fallen in love with the place the moment he set foot through the door. It was like a calm after the storm, a haven where he could lick his wounds and grow strong again.

The year leading up to the move had been the worst of his life. After leaving the RAF, in which he had served for three years after his training, he had gone back to his career as an architect. When the company went bust through financial mismanagement and shortages of some basic materials, he took out a loan to start up his own business. Sadly, it never really took off. He sold the premises at a loss, and found work with the local council, but hated every minute of it. His wife grew distant because there were no longer the funds to maintain the kind of life she wanted. Then his lively, darling daughter Abbie, by then aged eighteen, moved out of the family home and he had missed her terribly.

He hoped he and his wife Pauline would grow closer, and he believed this was happening – until he caught her in bed with his best friend, Peter. There had been a long and unpleasant period when he didn't know which way to turn. His daughter had been his salvation, but she had already forged a life of her own; she shared a flat with two other

girls and had a good job, working for a tea-importer in London. Thankfully, the break-up of her parents' marriage had not seemed to interfere too much with all that.

The divorce had been a messy business, and the only ones to come out of it winning were the lawyers. Still, Ben was determined not to slide into bitterness, because what was done was done, and there was no turning back for either of them.

When it was over, he and his wife were left with enough from the sale of their family home to start again. She had gone to live abroad with her new husband, while Ben chose a completely different way of life. He was happy enough now. Perhaps happier, in a strange way, than he had ever been.

Taking a deep invigorating sigh, he looked around the farmhouse. There was a warm feel of history in this delightful little place. He could not deny it had its disadvantages, though they were small compared to the joy he had found here. The whisper of a smile crossed his features as he recalled the number of times he'd banged his head on the low cross-beams, and the wood-burning stoves caused more dust and dirt than he could ever have envisaged. The small windows were draughty, and when the wind drove the rain, it came right through the framework to soak the walls. The flagstone floors were sunk and broken in places and even in the height of summer there was a dampness in the air that got right into the bones. This was his first winter in the cottage, and once the better weather arrived, he knew he would have to put in many a long hour working on the house in between his other responsibilities.

Yet in spite of all that, he would not have changed one single thing.

As always, he went straight to the kitchen, where he turned on the gas stove, filled the kettle and set it for boiling. 'Now

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then, Chuck.’ Going to the pantry, he took out a lamb chop and dropped it into the dog’s bowl. ‘You chew on that while I see who’s been writing to me.’

Returning to the dresser, he picked up the mail which had lain there since yesterday. There was a bill for animal feed, a card reminding him to return an overdue book to the local library, and a white envelope with a tuppenny stamp and a small pink flower drawn in the corner.

‘We know who this is from, don’t we, eh?’ He cocked an eye at the dog, who was far too busy enjoying his treat to worry about what the postman had brought.

Ben took out the letter and unfolded it, his eyes scanning the words and his heart warming as he read them aloud:

Dear Dad,

I’ve managed to get time off at last, so if it’s OK with you, I plan to visit for a few days. It’s been too long since we had a real heart-to-heart, don’t you think? I’m not sure which day I’ll turn up, but it’ll either be next Sunday or Monday. If that doesn’t fit in with your plans, you’ll have to let me know a suitable date. If I don’t hear from you, I’ll assume it’s all right to arrive sometime on one of those days. I’m really looking forward to seeing you. Meanwhile, take care of yourself,

Your loving daughter,

Abbie xxx

Folding the letter, he slipped it back into the envelope before dropping it onto the dresser.

‘You’ll need to look to your laurels,’ he told the dog with a wag of his finger. ‘Abbie’s coming to stay, and when she’s about, no one gets any peace!’ His daughter was noisy, untidy and could be the most irritating creature in the world.

More than a week of her company and he would likely be pulling his hair out. But oh, how he was looking forward to seeing her.

He was so excited that he cut his finger when making himself a cheese sandwich, and then found he could only nibble at it, though he swigged down three cups of tea and ravished the jam-tart made especially for him by Les's wife. In fact, she'd made him a whole bagful only the day before yesterday, and this was the last one. 'Sorry, matey,' he told the dog who had demolished his chop and was begging for a crumb. 'You've had your tea. This is mine, and besides, there isn't enough here to share.' Nevertheless, he was still shamed into throwing him a bite.

With the jam-tart all gone and the teapot emptied, Ben put on his work-clothes and with the dog at his heels, made his way to the yard where he unlocked the feed room. Here he laid out three large galvanised buckets; one for the chickens; one for the sheep and another for the pigs. That done, he lifted the lids from three of the drums and scooping out several sizeable helpings of food from each of them in turn, he filled the buckets to brimming.

Taking up the buckets, two in one hand and one in the other, he made his way over to the big barn. Knowing exactly when feed-time was, the sheep were already crowded round the food-troughs. On sight of him, they began pushing and shoving their way forwards. 'Get back! BACK, I SAY!'

Fighting his way through the bleating animals, he partway filled the various troughs, then leaving the sheep to sort themselves out, he climbed the ladder to the hayloft, where he threw down four slices of hay, making certain that they landed far enough apart for everyone to get a fair share without too much argument.

Afterwards, he stood at the barn door for a minute or two. Satisfied that the sheep were all feeding and seeming

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content, he went outside to the tap, filled the bucket with water, returned inside and emptied it into the two water-troughs. 'That should keep you going for a while,' he told them. 'Come the morning, I might let you loose in the fields.'

It was always a pleasure to set them free, for sheep were not indoor animals. Small-minded and built to eat, it was in their nature to nibble the pastures, get caught up in brambles and go lame at every opportunity.

With the sheep fed and set up for the night, he tramped off to the undercover pig-pens. Here he went through the same procedure, but with a different and coarser food, for pigs were gluttons and required bulk. Ben was always wary when surrounded by the porkers. Weighing upwards of half a ton each, they were capable of doing a man some considerable damage if he got in their way.

The boars in particular were an angry sort when penned, as old Les was quick to point out to Ben at the first opportunity. 'I once knew a man whose prize boar drove his tusks clean through the poor chap's thighbone; crippled him for life, it did. So don't go messin' with them big buggers, 'cause if they don't get yer with their tusks, they'll have yer over and trample yer underfoot!' Les did not have to tell Ben twice. It was ironic that poor Les himself came a cropper soon after he'd issued that warning.

With the pigs happily burying their snouts in the troughs, Ben attended to the other animals; first the cows, then the chickens.

The cows were housed in the smaller of the two barns. The area had been divided up to provide eight large pens on one side and six on the other, with a birthing pen at the far corner. The beasts had more than enough room and as long as they were fed and watered and clean underfoot, they saw out the winter in comfort; though once the worst of the

weather was over them, too, were always happy to be let loose in the fields.

The spacious chicken-house was a vast, open area, which gave the chickens ample room to run. At night they would either roost in the lower beams, or retire to the many small wooden houses set along either side of the walls. Sadly, some of the chickens fell prey to the odd fox who dared to burrow under the wire, which was dug in and around the entire perimeter. Thankfully it had not happened just lately, and Les kept a wary eye out for weak links in the netting.

A long while later, Ben made his weary way back to the farmhouse. At the door he kicked off his boots and overalls before going through to the parlour.

First, he made himself a cup of well-earned tea, then it was off upstairs for a much-needed bath. He'd lit the geyser to heat up the water long since. 'I can't be going to see the ladies smelling of pig manure and chicken-muck,' he told the dog, who simply rolled over, gave a long, shuddering yawn and fell into a deep sleep.

In the bathroom he turned on the taps and let the bath fill while he stripped off. A few moments later he slithered under the water and lay there for awhile, luxuriating in the warmth and thinking of young Mary, with whose pretty lavender-blue eyes and the way her mouth turned up at the corners when she smiled . . .