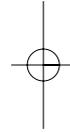
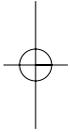
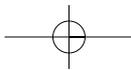


# WHEN THE BOYS COME HOME

Pamela Evans



headline



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## Chapter One

Tucked away among the serried ranks of terraced houses in the back streets of Hammersmith stood Morgan's Dairy, on the corner of Blossom Road. Like most parts of wartime London, the landscape of this riverside area was battered and depleted, the bomb sites a permanent reminder to the neighbourhood of the friends and loved ones they had lost.

Although the dairy building was run down and in need of redecoration – which it wouldn't get until after the war, when materials became available again – it was a fine Edwardian construction with elegant pillars flanking the entrance to the shop, which had an imposing corner frontage. This small family business was at the heart of the community, delivering fresh milk to its customers each morning, and incorporating a general store where people could obtain most of life's necessities, including a chat or a shoulder to cry on. There was an adjoining house in which the owner, Dai Morgan, lived with his wife, children and grandchildren.

As it happened, he was out on his milk round one morning in June 1944 when the eight o'clock news on the wireless caused a dramatic hush to descend upon the family over breakfast.

'Oh, good God alive! D-Day has come at last,' cried

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Dai's wife Dolly when the bulletin ended. Imbued with patriotic emotion, she stood up with shoulders straight and head held high and added in a respectful tone, 'God save the King.'

'Hear, hear,' whooped her elder daughter Megan. 'Our troops are back in France, yippee! It's been so long in coming, I can hardly believe it's true.'

'It didn't sound very official, though, did it?' observed her sister Hetty warily.

'That's probably because the news has only just come in and the newsreader doesn't have any more details about it,' their mother suggested brightly. 'He said there have been Allied landings in Normandy. In other words, it's D-Day. It'll be officially confirmed later on, most likely.'

'We don't need to wait for that, though,' decided Megan, rising with a purposeful air, the last precious vestiges of porridge in her bowl abandoned in the excitement. 'Let's go outside and see the boys of the air force on their way. Come on, kids.'

They all trooped into the small sunlit back garden, the children infected by the sudden buoyancy in the air even though they didn't know what it was all about.

'There they go,' said Dolly, squinting up at the clear blue sky where great fleets of planes roared overhead, as they had done intermittently since the early hours, presumably heading for the coast to give support to the ground troops involved in the invasion. 'Good luck, boys. You're heroes, every one of you.'

'Is the war over then?' asked Megan's daughter Netta; it was a reasonable assumption for a six-year-old to make, given the sudden upbeat atmosphere.

'Are we going to have a party in the street with jelly

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and cake and that?’ added her identical twin sister Poppy, eyes shining with hope. Both children were adorably pretty, with dark wavy hair like their father and the same sloe-black eyes.

‘And flags to wave?’ This was Hetty’s son George, a thin, brown-haired lad with solemn, shandy-coloured eyes and a rather pasty look about him.

‘Afraid not, kids. Not yet anyway,’ replied twenty-six-year-old Megan, her joy fading slightly as she wondered how many more servicemen would die before victory was finally achieved. Her husband had been sent abroad in the war’s early stages and she hadn’t seen him for almost four years. For security reasons, all communications from him were censored by the army, so he wasn’t able to let her know exactly where he was. She knew it was somewhere in the region of the Far East, though, which meant that he was too far away to be involved in today’s landings.

Now there were wails of disappointment from the children, who had grown up with the promise of huge celebrations after the war.

‘It won’t be long, though,’ assured their grandmother, a cheerful, warm-hearted soul with an endless capacity for optimism. In her mid-fifties, she was still easy on the eye in a homely, mumsy sort of way, being slight of build with greying blond hair and sparkling blue eyes. In direct contrast to her husband, who was of a rather serious nature and often affectionately teased for his Celtic melancholy, she was comical and light-hearted. ‘You’ll have plenty of jelly and cake, and bunting strung across the street, when the time comes. We’ll make sure of that, don’t you worry. It’ll be the best party you’ve ever been to, but you’ll have to wait a bit longer for it.’

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'How much longer?' enquired Netta.

'Nobody knows, love,' replied Dolly with a gusty sigh. 'We'll just have to be patient and wait until they get it sorted.' She paused, looking at her grandchildren. 'In the mean time, today is a very important day. When you're grown up with children of your own, you'll be proud to tell 'em that you remember D-Day.'

'Why can't we have a party if it's such a special day?' Poppy was nothing if not persistent.

'Because it isn't the sort of special that involves parties,' explained her mother.

'Not fair,' she pouted.

'It certainly isn't, love,' agreed Megan, who could understand her daughter's eagerness for some sort of merry-making. Today's children had so few treats: no ice cream or oranges or fancy food; just meagre portions of plain fare, and their precious sweet ration, which was a mere paucity compared to what had been available in peacetime. All this and the absence of their fathers too: it was hard on them even though they remembered nothing else. Megan poured all her energies into making them feel loved and secure. She wanted their childhood to be a happy one, despite everything. 'But it's much worse for Daddy and Uncle Ken. At least we're at home all together.'

'Dad won't be coming home yet then, Mum?' said George, who was just a few months younger than his cousins but much less exuberant, and permanently in thrall to them. He didn't remember his father but his homecoming was synonymous with the end of the war, which everything seemed to hinge on from the viewpoint of a child.

'No, not yet, George.' Sighing wistfully, his mother put a comforting arm around him. Twenty-five-year-old Hetty

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had been notified back in 1940 that her husband was in a prison camp, having been captured at Dunkirk, so there was no chance of his return until after the hostilities ended. 'But he'll get back to us as soon as he possibly can. And when he does come home we'll give him such a smashing welcome, he'll wonder what's hit him.'

The boy nodded, seeming satisfied with this.

'Cheer up, Hetty,' urged Dolly, observing her daughter's flagging spirits. 'All right, so the war isn't over yet, but it's the best news we've had in ages.'

'I'll say it is.' Megan was petite like her mother, with the same blue eyes and blond hair, though Megan's hair was lush with youth and she wore it in a simple shoulder-length bob. 'But for now, come on, kiddywinks, let's go back indoors to finish your breakfast, or you'll be late for school.'

In the general rush for the door, the high-spirited twins elbowed George aside.

'Oi, you two, not so rough,' admonished their mother sternly, because George was a delicate, sensitive boy. If there was anything going around, George would catch it. Coughs, sore throats, bilious attacks and colds made a beeline for him. Not so her beloved and boisterous twin daughters, who were always in robust health and often known as 'the terrible two' because of their tendency towards mischief. Being so complete in themselves, they didn't often need other playmates, which meant, inevitably, that George was sometimes excluded. That upset Megan, because he was such a sweet child and always seemed rather lonely. She constantly urged them not to leave him out, and they did as she asked up to a point, but neither she nor they could do anything about the special bond

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that existed between them as twins. 'Move out of the way and let George go inside first. He was in front of you.'

'Yeah, watch where you're going,' added Hetty firmly. 'There's no need for pushing and shoving.'

'Sorry,' they chorused and moved back to let George through.

Her sister's intervention hadn't been strictly necessary since Megan had already reprimanded the twins, but she didn't allow herself to be rattled by it. Living in the same house, a certain amount of communal discipline was inevitable. If Hetty were ever to step over the line and take liberties, she would find herself at war with Megan in defence of her children. But it was unlikely to happen. Megan and Hetty were friends as well as sisters, and understood each other.

Megan did sometimes have cause to worry about Hetty, though, in that she tended to be overly protective of George. It was understandable in a way as he was such a sickly child, but she did seem to fret excessively. Although rational in other areas of her life, she was almost paranoid when it came to her son, which couldn't be good for either of them.

Although the children had picked up on the excitement, they weren't old enough to understand the significance of today. Questions about victory parties and the return of their fathers from the war was just a habit to them, having been brought up in the anticipation of glorious peace and all that went with it. The twins had no emotional ties with their dad, as they had been so little when he went away. But Megan did what she could to keep Will's presence alive by talking about him and making sure his photograph was in a prominent place in the bedroom the three of them shared.

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Now they all settled back at the big round table in the homely parlour next to the kitchen and continued with breakfast, the adults falling into silence, each engrossed in their own thoughts.

'I wonder if your dad has heard the news yet,' mentioned Dolly eventually.

'I'll be surprised if he hasn't,' responded Megan, smiling at the thought of her father. 'Can you imagine Dad's customers keeping quiet about something as big as this? Everybody will be full of it.'

'Yeah, that's true,' said Dolly with a chuckle. Her husband was hugely popular in the area, despite the fact that he wasn't a sharp talker full of cockney banter like some of the London milkmen. People liked him because he was kind and reliable. 'Someone will have told him and given him a cuppa tea while they're at it, I expect.'

'Knowing Dad, he'll make sure of the cuppa,' put in Hetty. The younger woman wasn't at all like her sister to look at. Less pretty than Megan, but attractive in her own way, she was tall and angular, with the look of her father about her; she had the same striking combination of greyish-blue eyes and dark hair.

Just then the shop bell tinkled.

'Aye aye. Duty calls,' said Dolly, taking a quick sip of her tea before rising.

'Do we have to open the shop quite so early, Mum?' enquired Hetty, not for the first time. 'At least we could have our breakfast in peace if we opened up a little bit later, instead of having to get up and down to the bell.'

'How many more times must I tell you? People rely on us for bits and pieces on the way to work, and the customers are our bread and butter; never forget that,'

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lectured Dolly. 'Anyway, I don't mind an early start and there's never much of a rush until later on.'

'I'll go and see to this customer, Mum. You finish your tea,' offered Megan, reaching over and putting a restraining hand on her mother's arm.

'No, love, you stay and finish your breakfast and get the kids off to school,' Dolly said, moving away and leaving the room before there could be further argument.

To live in the Morgan home was to be involved in the family business. It was a way of life Megan and Hetty had grown up with. Having flown the nest after their respective marriages, they had returned when their husbands went away to war. It had seemed the only sensible thing to do, with the housing shortage so acute in London.

More important was the fact that their parents had needed their help in the dairy, with staff being called up for the services and war work. Living on the job meant they were always on hand. The war had caused the turnover of the business to drop: food had been rationed, and the demand for milk was reduced by a massive civilian evacuation from London, with men away on active service and milk deliveries being cut to one a day as part of government restrictions. When their father's roundsman had been called up for the army, Dad had decided to save on his outgoings by doing the job himself, so the business was now staffed by just the four of them.

Megan and Hetty worked as a team with their mother, doing their share of the household tasks, taking their turn in the shop and helping in the dairy. While their mother ran the shop, their father was in charge of the milk side of the business.

Although it was a relatively small business, there was a

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huge amount of work to be done behind the scenes: bottle-washing, sterilisation, filling and sealing the milk bottles, making sure the dairy was kept spotlessly clean and hygienic at all times, as well as keeping the shop stocked and the customers happy. There was also increased paperwork with the coming of ration books for shop goods, and as milk distributors, they were accountable to the Ministry of Food so daren't be dilatory in the task. The nature of their trade meant that it was seven days a week, but although they delivered milk every day, they only opened the shop for a few hours on a Sunday morning. At the end of each week either Megan or Hetty would go out on the round with their father to help collect the milk money.

A proud Welshman, their father lived by rules that were somewhat out of touch with modern times. Although he was happy for his wife and daughters to work with him in the business, he wouldn't allow them to actually do the milk round unless there was some dire emergency. He didn't think it fitting for a woman, despite the fact that milk-women had become a familiar sight on the streets of London since war broke out. Women were definitely the weaker sex in his opinion, never mind that they had been doing an excellent job of men's work throughout the war.

Dai was a good sort, though, a solid tower of a man, reliable to the core and able to take a joke despite his sombre nature. Megan smiled at the thought of how the family joshed with him when he was a bit too effusive on the subject of his beloved Wales. There was no stopping him once he got on to that subject.

'Come on then, you two,' she said to the twins now. 'If you've finished your breakfast you can go and get your things together for school.'

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'You too, George,' added her sister.

Chattering and giggling over something between themselves, as usual, the twins had to be told several more times before they finally did as their mother asked, while George got up immediately and headed for the stairs.

'Thanks for the tea, bach,' said Dai Morgan, emerging from a small terraced house. 'There's kind you are.'

'A pleasure, Dai,' said a large, smiling middle-aged woman who had been a customer of his for years. 'I wouldn't be much of a person if I didn't give my regular milkman a cuppa on a day like today, would I? It's been long enough coming.'

'Aye, it has,' he agreed, the lilt of West Wales still prominent even after so many years away. 'Let's hope they don't take as long to finish the job.'

'Ooh, don't say that, for goodness' sake, Dai,' she said in a tone of mild admonition.

'I didn't mean it literally,' he said, noticing her worried look.

'I should hope you didn't, especially on a day like today.' Wearing an apron over her summer frock, and carpet slippers on her feet, she poked her index finger under the front of her turban and scratched her scalp between the curlers, looking thoughtful. 'I don't think we'll have to wait too long, myself. Those damned Jerries don't stand a chance now that our boys are back on French soil. The war's all over bar the shouting.'

'There's optimistic you are and I hope you're right,' he said. 'My trouble is that I'm a realist and I can't help wondering what's happening to our boys now that they're back in France.'

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Her face tightened and she shook her head slowly, her lips pushed together in a grim line. 'I think we're all worried about that. There's more blood to be shed yet, and that's a fact. But at least there's been progress now, so we have to keep hoping for the best.' She paused, looking at him. 'Are your girls' husbands involved in the invasion?'

'No. One of them is a POW, the poor dab, and the other is further afield somewhere.'

'Maybe now that the second front has started, you'll have 'em both home soon.'

'I hope so.' Humour wasn't his forte but he decided to give it a try to lighten the mood, especially as this customer enjoyed a joke. 'Apart from anything else, I need them here to give me some back-up support against all those damned women. Now that my daughters have come back home to live, there's five o' them including the twins. There's bossy they are.'

'You poor thing. My heart bleeds for you,' she chortled. 'I'm sure a big strong boy from the valleys is more than a match for a few women about the place. They are the backbone of this country, you know.'

He gave a wry grin. 'So they tell me, on a regular basis,' he said. 'So don't you start.'

She loved this sort of banter. 'You know we're right,' was her spirited response.

'Aye, maybe I do, but I shan't tell them that or they'll make my life hell.'

'You thrive on it.'

'Course I do. I wouldn't be without them and they know it.'

'That's what I like to hear.'

'Anyway, I'd better be on my way.' He turned to go.

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'So long, bach. Thanks again for the tea. You look after yourself now.'

'Ta-ta, Dai. Mind how you go.'

A big-built man with rugged features, Dai was tall and thick around the middle. He had dark hair peppered with white, and grey-blue eyes that made him look every inch a Celt. Whistling softly to the tune of 'Bless 'Em All', he walked to his milk cart parked at the kerb, loaded a crate of empty bottles on to it and paused for a breather, feeding his black shire horse with a carrot.

'There's a good pal you are, Chips.' He fondled the horse's head, the whiteness of the blaze down the front of the animal's face gleaming in the sunshine. 'You're a good worker too. We're partners, you and me. I couldn't do without you and that's a fact.'

A strong believer in communication between man and beast, and extremely fond of his horse, he stood with him for a few minutes longer then led him to the next block of houses in the narrow London street, pausing on the way at a horse trough for him to drink some water.

It was a fine, sunny morning and it felt good to be out in the open air. He'd been forced by wartime economics to go back on the round himself but he was very glad he had; he enjoyed being at the grass roots of the business again.

With the shortages and limitations of wartime, things were hard in the dairy trade, but working together as a family they were managing to keep the business ticking over. At least he had his own reserved territory now, so he was safe from competition from the big dairies that would monopolise milk distribution in the capital given half the chance. Some small dairy owners he knew of had already

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sold out to them. But not Dai! Never! He'd worked too hard to build his business to hand it over to someone else.

London had been kind to him, he reflected, as he made his way from house to house, leaving the full milk bottles on the doorstep and collecting the empties, cursing those customers who hadn't put theirs out. It wasn't good enough, especially as it was generally known that there was a serious bottle shortage.

The streets here hadn't exactly been paved with gold when he'd been forced to leave his beloved Wales in search of employment at the beginning of the century. He hadn't been much more than a boy at the time.

But at least he'd found work, which there was precious little of in rural Wales in those days. He'd got a job as a milk roundsman initially, turning his hand to other things in his spare time to put a few extra quid in his pocket: labouring; painting and decorating; delivering groceries to posh people in the big houses. Anything as long as it came up with the dosh and was legal. His hard work and determination had paid off and he'd eventually been able to open his own dairy, by which time he'd married his lovely Dolly, whom he had met when she'd been working as a kitchen maid in one of the big houses he delivered to. The poor dab had been brought up in an orphanage and put into service as soon as she was old enough.

In those days the milk had been fresh straight from the cow, and very tasty it was too. Nowadays pasteurisation was all the rage, in London anyway, so he purchased his milk from the wholesaler ready treated rather than invest money in the equipment to do it himself. He'd managed to get some basic machinery when times had been good for various other routine dairy tasks.

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Despite the war, and all the heartache and misery it caused, he was happy with his lot. Even, he thought affectionately, if he did live in a house overrun by the opposite sex, with their women's talk, mania for tidiness and lack of interest in football or the inner workings of an automobile engine. Dai was a man's man. He'd grown up in a world where men provided, women ran the home and Father was most definitely the boss.

He grinned to himself. He wouldn't fancy his chances if he tried to introduce that regime into his house; they all had plenty to say for themselves. He loved the bones of them all, but a spot of male company wouldn't go amiss. There was George, bless him, but it would be a long time before he was old enough to assert his presence and be an ally to his grandfather.

Dai thought the world of all his grandchildren, but although he tried never to show it, there was a special place in his heart for his grandson, maybe because he hadn't had any sons of his own. There's lovely it was, to have a boy in the family. But if the poor lad wasn't being teased and tormented by his cousins, his mother was fussing over him like flaming Florence Nightingale. True, he wasn't a robust child and had had a lot of illness in his life so far, but he didn't need to be smothered. He was a boy; he needed a bit of rough and tumble.

Although there was plenty of Welshness in Dai's heart, there was precious little of it in his home, which was inevitable as his wife was a Londoner through and through and his daughters had been born and raised here. His elder daughter Megan had been named after her grandmother on his side, so at least there was a touch of Cymru in that.

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But Dai hadn't kept up with the customs like some of his compatriots, who went to the Welsh chapels here and conducted their social life in their mother tongue. It wasn't that he hadn't wanted to exactly; just that he'd drifted away from it over the years and had allowed himself to mingle into the metropolis. He'd become a part of the way of life here, especially after he'd married Dolly. But he would always be Welsh at heart and still had a passion for his homeland.

Oh well, press on and count your blessings, boy, he thought, as he neared the end of his round.

The news of D-Day was officially confirmed just after half past nine that morning by the well-known broadcaster John Snagge. The King spoke to the nation on the wireless in the evening. Megan reflected on his broadcast as she lay in bed listening to the even breathing of her sleeping daughters. She had found his obvious sincerity profoundly moving. He had matched her mood completely, and she thought most other people would have felt the same. Her thoughts turned to her dear husband Will and she was besieged by a plethora of emotions: fear for his life and dread that he might never return, turmoil at the memory of his complex personality, and above all love for him so deep, it hurt just to think about it. She hadn't heard from him for a while so had no idea whether he was alive or dead, and was hardly able to even consider the latter. Twenty-six was no age to die.

Although Will was everything to her, theirs wasn't an easy marriage. But she vowed that if he was spared she would try even harder to understand him.

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Her stomach churned at the thought that she must find the time to visit his mother. The fact that she wasn't easy to get along with didn't alter the fact that Will was her son and she would be as worried about him as Megan was.

Megan could hardly bear to imagine how her mother-in-law would cope if Will didn't come back from the war. That would be one blow too many for a woman who had already had more than her fair share of anguish and was filled with bitterness and resentment as a result. As disagreeable as she so often was, she was still Will's mother and as such would be treated with respect by Megan. Somewhere beneath the older woman's prickly persona there beat a warm heart, Megan was sure of it.

'I thought I'd just pop over to see how you are,' said Megan to Audrey Stubbs.

'I'll put the kettle on,' responded Audrey indifferently. According to people who had known her for a long time, she had once been strikingly beautiful, smartly dressed and extremely gregarious. Now she was almost white-haired, dowdy and very unsociable, her attractive features distorted by a permanently harsh expression as she exuded aggression towards the world in general. She was tall and overly thin, with a hopeless stoop about her, and she looked much older than her fifty-odd years.

'Thank you, that'll be lovely,' said Megan politely, sitting down at the kitchen table while the other woman filled the kettle and put it on the gas stove to boil. It was the following afternoon and they were in the kitchen of Megan's in-laws' small house on the borders of Hammersmith and Chiswick. Audrey lived here with her

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husband Jack, an amiable, unassuming man who worked as a welder in an engineering factory. Will was their only child – now.

‘D-Day came at last then,’ commented Megan sociably.

Audrey shrugged. ‘About bloomin’ time an’ all,’ she stated with disapproval. ‘I don’t know what took them so long. The people who run the military must be nothing short of useless, every damned one o’ them.’

‘I suppose they do their best,’ responded Megan patiently. ‘The invasion must have been a massive thing to organise, and they would have had to wait until the time was right. There’s a lot to it that we don’t know about, I think.’

‘Yeah, maybe there is, but those who are running it should have made it their business to get it done before,’ Audrey grumbled. ‘This war has gone on for far too long. It isn’t right, people having to put up with so much pain and suffering.’

‘Most people seem to think the end won’t be long now, though,’ mentioned Megan, determined not to get into an argument about the logistics of the war.

‘Time will tell,’ Audrey said gloomily.

‘It was good news, though, about D-Day.’

‘Mm, no doubt about that,’ she replied without much interest. ‘But there’s still a lot of fighting to be done before it’s over.’ She looked at Megan. ‘Have you heard from Will lately?’

Megan shook her head.

‘Neither have we.’

‘Will’s a survivor,’ Megan tried to reassure her. ‘If anyone will come through the war, it’s him.’

‘I know that,’ Audrey said sharply. ‘There’s not much

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point in worrying about it anyway; there's nothing we can do except wait and work our fingers to the bone for the war effort.'

'How's the job going?' Audrey worked a morning shift on war work in a factory nearby.

'It's bloomin' hard work,' she replied. 'But I'm glad to get out of the house, to tell you the truth. It's better than being indoors all day, thinking about things.'

Will's twin brother Ron had died in a drowning accident when the boys were fourteen. From what Megan had heard, it had had a disastrous effect on both Will and his mother. Will and Ron had had the special closeness that was common in identical twins and had been inseparable, which meant that one was lost without the other. Apparently the grief had sent Will off the rails for a while, and his parents had had a hard time with him when he'd started to hang out with yobs and got into trouble with the police for rowdiness on the streets. Although the yobbish behaviour had proved to be just a phase, Megan believed that he had never got over his brother's death. Sadly, though, he never opened up to her on the subject.

As for Audrey, she'd been broken by it and left angry and belligerent towards everyone, in particular Will, who had been with Ron at the time of the accident. Sometimes it seemed to Megan as if Audrey resented Will for being alive when Ron wasn't. Will had never spoken to her about it but she guessed he must be very hurt.

Will had been almost nineteen when Megan met him, so the trauma had been in the past, though the effects of it had been very much in the present. He was handsome, caring and full of down-to-earth humour and charm, which was why she'd fallen in love with him and married

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him. But even though there was tremendous chemistry between them, she never felt emotionally close to him. A part of him held back and that distressed her.

There was a darkness within him that seemed to go beyond grief somehow, and wasn't apparent to other people. On the surface he was sociable and funny. Everyone liked Will Stubbs. Only Megan and possibly his mother – if she could see beyond her own misery – knew about the other side of him. He never raised a hand to her but he built a wall between them as solid as bricks and mortar.

'How's Jack?' Megan asked dutifully now.

'He's all right; plodding on the same as ever,' Audrey replied, sounding bored. 'How's everybody with you? Are the kids behaving themselves?'

'They're up to all sorts, as usual,' said Megan, pride and love unmistakable in her voice. 'There's never a dull moment when those two are around. They certainly keep me on my toes.'

'It's with there being two of them,' suggested Audrey wistfully. 'My boys were the same.'

'Twins, eh, who'd have 'em,' joked Megan. Realising immediately that her light-hearted remark might prod at Audrey's wounds, she opted for a swift change of subject. 'The children thought the war was over yesterday when the news came though about the invasion, with us all rushing into the garden like mad things. They thought perhaps we'd be having a victory party.'

'Huh! Chance would be a fine thing,' said Audrey tartly, pouring the tea and putting two cups on the table before she sat down herself. 'God only knows how long they'll have to wait for that.'

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Getting a dialogue flowing with this unhappy woman was nigh on impossible. Megan stayed just long enough to be polite, then left feeling depressed. Audrey always had that effect on her. But at the same time she was filled with compassion for her mother-in-law, and couldn't bear to think how she herself would cope if she lost one of her children. She doubted if she would get over it either. It was a dreadful burden for Audrey to have to live with, so Megan would continue to visit no matter how cold the welcome.

'How do you make someone like you, Grandad?' George enquired in a serious tone.

Considering the matter for a few moments, Dai looked down at the skinny scrap of a boy with freckles on his nose and solemn pale brown eyes. 'I'm not sure I know the answer to that, boy. Treat them decently, I suppose.'

'I do, but they still don't seem to like me.'

'In that case they must be a bit *twp*,' he said, using the Welsh word for stupid. 'Who is it, anyway, who doesn't like you?'

'I can't tell you that.'

'Some boy at school, is it?'

George shook his head,

'Only your mum will be up that school like lightning to get it put right if some bully is getting at you,' Dai told him gravely. 'No doubt about it. So speak up if that's what it is.'

'It's nothing to do with school.'

It was the following Saturday, just after midday, and they were in the dairy yard. Dai had finished his round and was unloading the crates of empty bottles from the

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cart and stacking them in the dairy ready for washing and sterilisation. The horse was still coupled to the cart prior to being taken back to the communal stables used by local tradespeople, having finished his work for the day.

'Why can't you tell me who it is then?' Dai asked.

'Because it would be telling tales.'

'Mm, there is that, I suppose.' He considered the matter some more. 'Still, if it stays between us it wouldn't matter. It's only if the other person gets into trouble over it that it would be tale-telling, and they won't if no one else knows about it.'

'You promise not to tell anyone?'

'When have I ever let you down?' said Dai 'You know our little chats never go any further.'

George looked pensive. 'Well, all right, I'll tell you,' he said, still reluctant.

'Spit it out then, George, before I grow old waiting.'

'It's the twins,' he blurted out, looking as though he wished he hadn't.

Dai tutted loudly. 'I might have known those little monkeys would be behind it.' He shook his head slowly. 'High spirits, it is. I'm sure they don't mean to be unkind.'

'Yes they do. They're always mean to me. They're always taking the mick, saying I'm a sissy boy just because I'm not as daring as they are.' He paused then became vehement. 'They hate me.' Another pause and his mouth tightened. 'And I hate them back.'

'You just said you wanted them to like you.'

'Well I do, but as they're never gonna like me, I might as well hate them too.'

'Now you're talking *twp*,' Dai admonished. 'Your cousins are twins and they don't really need anyone else. It isn't

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that they don't like you in particular; just that they have each other. They're probably the same with everybody.'

'I wish I had a brother or sister,' sighed George. 'Then I'd have someone of my own as well.'

'You have pals in the street and at school, don't you?'

'I s'pose so.'

Dai suspected that they might be a little thin on the ground but he wasn't going to cause the boy more pain by mentioning it. The harsh reality was that the school playground could be hell on earth for a boy like George, who wasn't as physically strong as the others.

'I could have a word with your Auntie Megan about the twins, if it'll help,' suggested Dai. 'Ask her to tell them to be a bit kinder to you, is it?'

George was horrified at the suggestion. 'You promised you wouldn't say anything,' he said, a scarlet flush suffusing his face and neck. 'If you do that it really would mean I'd been telling tales and the twins will hate me even more.'

'All right, boyo, don't get yourself into a state about it,' Dai said kindly. 'My lips are sealed. But can you try to stand up to those cousins of yours a bit more? That might help.'

'I try to but it doesn't work. They just laugh at me; they're always giggling.'

'It's in their nature, son,' Dai told him. 'You're like a brother to them, and all sisters and brothers tease each other.'

'It wouldn't be so bad if they were boys. But girls . . .' George looked disgusted and emitted an eloquent sigh. 'They like playing stupid girls' games: mothers and fathers and that. They want me to join in when they're playing

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that because I have to be their flippin' kid. And if they're playing skipping I always have to turn the rope.' He reached up and patted the horse gently, as though drawing comfort from the animal. 'I hardly ever get a turn at skipping. It doesn't matter how much I argue with them about it. They think they're the boss of everything, just because they're twins.'

'As you won't let me say anything, I can't do much to help you as regards your cousins, but I tell you what I *can* do to cheer you up,' said Dai, removing the last crate from the cart, uncoupling the horse and putting the cart against the whitewashed wall of the dairy. 'I can take you with me to take Chips back to the stable. You can have a ride on his back if you like.'

The boy's eyes lit up. 'Ooh, could I, Grandad?'

'Yeah, I don't see why not.' For the boy's sake he chose not to remind himself of his daughter's disapproval of such things. Hetty was over at the house so with a bit of luck she'd be none the wiser and no harm done. 'Come on then, young 'un. Up you go.' He helped him up and George sat astride, smiling broadly. 'Hold on to the horse's mane,' Dai said as the animal moved forward. 'Slowly does it.'

Before they could progress further, there was a sudden violent interruption.

'What on earth do you think you're doing, Dad?' shrieked Hetty, running across the yard towards them, a look of terror in her eyes, her face scarlet and blotchy.

'Taking him to the stables to take Chips back,' he explained, knowing that he was in big trouble but standing his ground and staying between her and the horse. 'I'm letting him have a ride as it's only a few minutes' walk down the road.'

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'You know I don't allow it.'

'There's no harm in it, love.'

'Are you trying to kill my son or something?'

'Look at me, Mum,' chirped the boy gleefully. 'I'm up here, ever so high.'

But Hetty was far too upset to pay any attention to her son's obvious pleasure. 'Get him down at once, Dad,' she demanded, her voice quivering. 'He'll break his neck if he falls off.'

'But he won't fall off,' her father assured her. 'I'll make damned sure of that.'

'Get him down,' she shouted, her voice distorted with desperation as she moved towards the horse. 'Quick, before he falls off. Don't worry, George; we'll soon have you down from there.'

'I don't want to come down, Mum,' the boy told her, his smile fading. 'I like it up here. I'm going for a ride with Grandad.'

'You're far too young to be on horseback. There isn't even a saddle,' she disapproved hotly.

'We're only going down the road. He'll be all right—'

'You're really out of order this time, Dad,' Hetty interrupted furiously. 'You're encouraging him to do things he's far too young for. Now get him off that horse or get out of my way so that I can do it.'

'Leave the boy alone, love,' requested Dai in a tone of quiet persuasion. 'It's only a bit of fun.'

'For you maybe,' she ranted, almost beside herself now. 'You're the kid around here, not George. It's high time you grew up and started acting your age.'

'Don't you talk to me like—'