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Opening extract from

Storm Horse

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A STORM AND A FUNERAL

The wind howled. Rain lashed against the windows. The ferry boat lurched as a wave of dirty brown water slammed into its side, and for one terrifying instant Flip thought they were going to capsize. His throat closed up. The blood roared in his ears and he squeezed his eyes tight shut, expecting the sea to come crashing in around him any second.

Then the boat righted itself and ploughed on through the heaving sea. It was heading for Mossum, the tiny island that was to be Flip's new home. He wasn't looking forward to it. He didn't feel happy. He'd never been to the island and he didn't know anybody who lived on it. Nobody, that is, except for the silent, forbidding figure beside him.

Uncle Andries.

Uncle Andries scared Flip. He'd scared him from the moment they'd met, two days before, when he'd arrived in the city to arrange his brother's funeral. His brother was Flip's father. And as Flip's mother had left them three years before and never been heard from since, twelve-year-old Flip was all alone in the world.

His uncle's appearance had only made him feel more alone. He'd walked into the house where Flip had been staying, looked the boy up and down and said, 'I'm your father's older brother. You will call me Uncle Andries.'

He was a tall man with a big head that looked even bigger because his hair had been cut so short that the back and sides were almost bald. The sleeves of his jacket and the legs of his trousers were short too and made his hands and feet stick out. He loomed over Flip like a silent giant expecting a reply.

Then he frowned. 'Don't you shake hands here in the city?' he asked. 'It's considered good manners where I come from.'

Flip was too startled to speak. He'd never seen a picture of his uncle in his life. Even more confusing, Uncle Andries had a very thick northern accent Flip found hard to understand and he'd been busy concentrating on listening instead of offering a greeting.

'I suppose,' Uncle Andries continued, 'your father never bothered teaching you. That does not surprise me.'

'I – I'm sorry,' Flip began, finally holding out a trembling hand.

But Uncle Andries had already left the room. He took Flip back to the flat – the flat where Flip had lived with his father – then left to speak to the landlord. Finally he went out. When he returned, he said he'd made all the arrangements for the funeral. He also said he'd arranged with the authorities for Flip to come and live with him, and told him he should pack everything he wanted to take in two suitcases. *Only* two. Then he'd made them both supper and gone to bed. Not once had he asked Flip how he was.

He didn't ask the next day, either. The two of them got up, ate a silent breakfast and carried their suitcases to the cemetery. There they stood at the graveside, listening to the priest intone the service. Flip did his best to pay attention, but he couldn't concentrate. He missed his dad, but he missed his mum even more. And all he could do as he stood beside his uncle was keep looking up and across the gravestones to the cemetery gates, hoping – really, really hoping – that she would come walking through them any minute. Even though she'd left them all those years ago, Flip couldn't believe his mum would leave him on his own now.

But she never appeared. And Flip's loneliness only deepened.

With a start, he realized that the service was over. He looked up to see Uncle Andries shaking the priest's hand, then scooping up some earth and letting it fall slowly on to the coffin.

'It's time to go,' he said.

Less than thirty minutes later, they were in a train

heading north and Flip had his face pressed to the window, watching as the canals, bridges and bustling pavements of Amsterdam faded away. In their place came nothing but kilometre after kilometre of flat green fields dotted with sheep and cows. He wondered if he'd ever see his home again.

The boat heaved wildly again, jolting Flip out of his memories. He could see a smudge of land ahead, which meant they'd nearly arrived. But the sky was even darker now and the wind even fiercer. Foam-flecked waves crashed against the side of the ferry. Flip, who'd never been anywhere near the sea in his life, was terrified. He clung grimly to his suitcases with every ghastly roll of the vessel and prayed for the journey to be over. He was certain he was going to be sick any minute. And if he wasn't sick, he thought, then it would only be because the ferry had sunk and everyone on board had drowned.

Beside him, Uncle Andries paid the weather no attention at all. He didn't even seem to know that there *was* a storm. He sat bolt upright with his arms folded across his chest and gazed out of the windows as though the sun were shining and the sea was as flat as a pond.

In the end, Flip wasn't sick. And as the minutes crept by and Mossum's harbour drew ever closer, the wind began to fade and the sea to calm. Soon the rolling stopped completely and the ferry glided gently in towards the dock. The crew threw ropes to the men on dry land to tie her fast. The other passengers gathered their belongings, ready

to disembark.

But Uncle Andries remained in his seat. He stared down at Flip. 'I have something to say to you,' he said.

Flip, whose stomach was still rolling, waited in nervous silence.

'Your father and I were not friends,' Uncle Andries said. 'Did you know that?'

Flip had absolutely no idea how to reply, so all he did was nod again.

'He was lazy,' Uncle Andries continued. 'He didn't like working on the farm. When our father died, *your* father left and went to Amsterdam. He became a thief. This is why we never spoke after he left. Because I do not like thieves. If you want something in this world, you must earn it. You can't just take it, the way your father did.'

In front of them, the passengers were lining up before the exit. Uncle Andries still hadn't moved.

'I say this,' he continued, 'because I want you to know what to expect from me. I did not trust my brother and I am not sure whether I trust you. I think you may have picked up many bad habits from him. But I am your new father now, so I will look after you. That is my duty. My wife Elke is your new mother and my daughter Laurentia is your new sister. You will treat them both with respect. You will also do what I say and you will not argue with me because small boys do not argue with their fathers. And that,' he finished, 'is all I have to say. So now we will leave.'

He got up, took his case and one of Flip's, then walked

away without a backward glance. Flip followed reluctantly. In his hand was the other suitcase, the one he'd guarded jealously every inch of the way from home to the cemetery and then to the station.

That had been hard. Really hard. It was so heavy it had kept banging against his legs as he walked, no matter how much he'd shifted it from hand to hand. It was just as bad lugging it off the boat and down the gangplank because now he not only had aching fingers to deal with, but a queasy stomach and legs still wobbly from the trip across the Wadden Sea. But he never let on. He never gave a sign of how he felt. The last thing he wanted was for his uncle to discover what was in the case – it was too important to him to let that happen.

As they stepped on to dry land, the clouds above them parted and a thick, dazzling beam of sunlight shone down directly on to the dock. The holidaymakers ahead of them clapped their hands and let out a happy cheer.

Flip, with Uncle Andries' last words still ringing in his ears, had never felt so lonely in all his life.