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Opening extract from

Winter Damage

Written by

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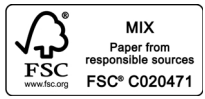
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CHAPTER ONE

There was good in this world and there was evil but the young girl had not yet learnt the difference. She didn't have the time for noticing or wondering. Everything was just chores and more.

She sat with her face pressed hard against the thin scratched plastic of the windowpane, her legs bunched tight against the sill, and she counted the crows that bothered the crops in the upper sketch of field and the magpies that came into the yard. There were seven of them, gabbing their secrets to the chickens, who couldn't have cared less.

The girl banged on the window. She hadn't just thrown down scraps to have them eaten by the cackling devil birds.

Her breath fogged the fake glass and she drew a smiley, then smeared it clear and sighed.

Dad was calling from the other side of the trailer and she slid reluctantly to her feet.

'Ennor, you about, girl?' His voice pitched and split like a reed and Ennor pictured briefly how he used to be before, ordering her around the farm and laughing when she got things wrong, his little deputy, running three steps to his one.

The short hallway that led to his room was near dark in the morning half-light. Ennor had taken the bulbs from their sockets months ago to save on the leccy.

'Girl?' he repeated.

'Comin, Dad.'

She knocked on his door out of polite habit and went in. The room smelt of stale cigarette smoke and night-old pee and she crossed the room to draw back the curtains and crank open the window.

'It's cold.'

'I know, Dad, but you need some fresh air. It smells like rot in here.'

She went to the wardrobe and pulled out the spare blanket and stretched it over the bed. 'How you feelin?'

'Same as always.' He coughed and reached for one of the many cigarettes she'd rolled and stacked in a pile on his bedside table.

Ennor took the lighter from her jeans' pocket and lit his cigarette and one for herself, and father and daughter looked at each other while they inhaled, waiting for him to wake fully.

'So how's my girl this mornin?'

'Fine, Dad.'

'And the animals?'

'Fed and watered.' She smiled and sat down on the easy chair near the window like always.

'Good.' He nodded and flicked ash towards the heaving ashtray and missed. 'And that brother of yours?'

'Off to school, fed and watered just the same.'

'Good, good.'

They sat in silence, apart from the coughing. Ennor wanted to ask about money but she knew they had none. They'd had none for a long time now and she was running out of things to sell and places where shopkeepers weren't suspicious of her idle standing.

She cleared her throat and looked out of the window at the heavy tinted sky, knowing, from necessity as a farmer's daughter, that snow was heading their way. She leant forward to see if all four corners of the window were filled with cloud and they were.

'What is it?' he asked. 'I know you got somethin to say so just say it to have it said.'

Ennor looked back into the room with a start. She thought of the ways to say something without upsetting someone but then it just came out. 'We int got no food in the cupboards to speak of, the cattle are thin as bones plus we're down to the last of the silage and most of all we're eight weeks without rent and eight's our final warning. The landlord's bin knockin.'

'My.' He laughed and coughed at the same time. 'Anythin else?'

Ennor nodded and got up to stand at the window. 'Yep, there's a storm comin.' She held back the curtain and he looked past her at the yellowing sky.

'What should I do, Dad?'

'Close the bloody window for starters and get your old man a cup of tea. Can't think without tea.'

Ennor stood beside the bed and crossed her arms.

'Don't be like that, girl. Dad always comes through with somethin, don't he?'

Ennor shrugged. She wanted to disagree but you weren't supposed to kick people already way down in the dung heap.

'Yes, Dad.' She smiled. 'Only don't be expectin strong tea cus the bag's already bin through twice this mornin and the milk's powdered.'

She left the room and went to the kitchen to get the tin kettle and she carried it to the outside pump to fill it, then brought it to the stove and banked the fire with clumps of offcut wood she'd scavenged from the barn.

The weather was getting colder and she refilled the five-gallon milk churns at the pump in case it froze and dragged them inside the makeshift porch that someone at some time had bolted on to the trailer.

She stood with her hands in her pockets and leant against the stove and saw by the clock on the wall that it was nine o'clock. Class would be starting around about now and she wondered if she was ever missed in the town's small school.

Since the phone had been cut off the welfare officer had visited only once and that was three months ago. A lot had happened in those three months, things had fallen apart and gone wrong and were just plain busted and broke, but Ennor still stood in the kitchen that smelt of woodsmoke and chicken fat and watched the kettle boil same as always. She went and looked out of the window like she had a hundred times before, watching the seasons change and scanning the horizon and the leaves for colourful signs of hope. There was nothing but white, a blank-page stare and a laughable routine.

The kettle sent sudden spits of steam towards the ceiling and momentarily lifted the linoleum on the wall into blisters of warm air, moving mouths of gossip followed by tight lips.

Ennor loosened the tea in the damp tea bag with a pinch and poured the water in, pressing and stirring this way and that until the liquid hinted at colour. She added a dip of the powdered milk to make it look better.

She returned to the bedroom to find that Dad had drifted back to sleep. His cigarette lay in a burnt hole in the blanket. She put the butt into the ashtray and checked the hole wasn't smouldering, then pulled the blanket around him before taking the mug of tea to the bedroom she shared with her brother, Trip.

In the squat room she put on her mother's old Loretta Lynn CD and sat cross-legged on her bed, listening to the lyrics for clues to her own miserable life and

wishing she knew the reasons behind all the things she didn't understand.

She sipped the tea and its dryness caught in her throat and tickled her ears, the brief hit of warmth heavenly on such a cold morning.

Out of the window the sky fixed heavy with mood and a few sparks of sleet flicked against the pane like bad reception in a news report from a war-torn country, fussing her reflection into a messy scowl. She stood up and sighed because work never had a line put through it. She clicked the misery mute button inside her head and went to the porch to put on her hat and coat and the ripped wellies with the posh buckles.

Outside the easterly wind caught against her cheek like a well-placed slap and she lifted her coat collar as she ran across the yard and through the gate that led to the field.

The cows were still at the silage she'd dumped there that morning and Ennor swore at herself for not listening to the weather last night. Not only would she have to lead them down to the barn, she would have to bring down the silage too.

She opened the gate and they glanced up, puzzled, briefly concerned for the young girl who fed and cared for them, then continued eating.

'You got the life, int you, girls?' She patted one of them on their hindquarters and winced as her hand cupped the knuckle bones that popped through the skin like studs on a leather jacket.

If the cows didn't survive the winter, she'd have no calves in spring and no money coming in except Dad's social, and their carcasses would be taken by the knackers to be minced into dog's dinner.

Since the last outbreak of foot-and-mouth things had turned worse from the top of the country to the bottom. Ennor didn't remember it all so well. She was only seven at the time and losing the prize cattle was the least of their problems once they had lost the farmhouse and the land and her dad went half mad with the misery and then the drugs.

The half-dozen cows, a barn and the field that caught the worst wind were all they had left, and them a rope-run of farming kin that went back to the day dot.

She stood with the wind pushing against her back and rubbed her chin like the old men in the village and she wondered whether to bother moving the silage and decided against. If the cows were hungry, they would more than likely have it eaten before the snow came proper and, besides, there was nothing but fumes left in the ancient tractor, not even enough for sniffing.

She leant into the wind and took some comfort from its support as she watched the grey muck landscape get scrubbed and cleaned white. A transformation that hid the unfertile truth: this land was a hopeless scuff of nothing.

She gripped her collar to her jaw and ran from the cover-up hill back down the path to the trailer and sat by

the stove in her outdoor clothes until heat seeped back slowly into her bones.

Ennor pulled out the tiny plastic table that was meant for outdoor use and swung it in front of her. She set a biro and her notebook square in the middle.

She sat flat-palmed like she used to at school and clicked the radio on for company and hummed along to a tune she didn't recognise, looking to the window for creative inspiration and, when inspiration didn't come from the cold, she watched the embers of the fire for sparks.

Another song came on and then the news headlines and talk of the weather and instead of poetry Ennor wrote 'Things to do' at the top of the page. She underlined it three times to compound its importance and wrote one to ten in the margin of the notebook, circling the numbers and drawing smileys in each corner of the page.

An expert on the news was telling Cornwall to brace itself for the worst winter since 1978 and Ennor laughed as she connected the smileys with chains because they said this every year. She looked at the radio and told it that it knew she was right.

The newsreader rattled on about 1978's Winter of Discontent and history repeating itself and when he listed the latest riot hot spots Ennor clicked the button to shut him up.

She'd rather have no company than bad company.

Talk of the looting and strikes was everywhere but Ennor fancied there were other things that might be important besides doom and gloom, like hope. Without that they'd all be close to swinging out in the barn like her friend Butch's dad. He was lucky they found him before he choked, though she supposed he didn't see it that way.

She ripped out the 'Things to do' page and wrote 'Things I'd like' on the fresh page, making the letters bigger than before.

She started the list in order of importance, beginning with a proper house of their own like backalong and, despite knowing the facts, she wrote that she wanted her dad to get better in all ways. She added she'd like to buy herself and Trip horses so they could ride out in the fields together, and she underlined the word 'buy' to show whoever it was that presided over wish lists that she was serious and not asking for straight doley handouts.

With the radio off she could hear her father stirring in his bed in the other room and she huffed and pushed the table back to fill the kettle again.

'Comin, Dad.' She knocked at his door and went in. 'Kettle's on.'

She straightened the bedding and went to the window.

'Leave that and come and sit down.' He patted the bed and Ennor did as she was told.

'Just bin thinkin bout what you said, money bein tight and all, and I remembered there's this bloke in town who owes me a few quid. I'll put the word out, see if I can't get him to pay up.'

Ennor put her hands deep into her pockets to keep them from fiddling. Niggling suspicions had a way of making her rub them and scratch, and she'd been training herself to be calm.

'Honest?' she asked.

'God's honest.' He smiled.

'How much?'

'Enough for Christmas, enough to treat my kids I'd think.'

Despite herself Ennor was warmed through by his moment of lucidity and fine words. She looked at the bootlace ring that lived around his neck and it winked. Mum's ring.

She wished she could take that warmth with her from his room and carry it around like a kitten all day long but there was one fat spoiler she had to ask.

'What about the rent, Dad? We're massive behind.'

The smile on his face dropped a little and he tried to edge forward as if he were about to whisper in her ear.

'Forget bout that, I'll take care of it.' He brushed the hair from her face with the hand that didn't shake so much and painted a smile across her face with his thumb. 'That's my girl. Go and get your old man a cuppa.'

Ennor wondered if what he'd told her was true. She jiggled his words about in her head and decided it was because he never really lied. Sometimes he twisted the truth but that was because of his medication and not really his fault.

She made a pot of tea with a fresh tea bag and gave it time to steep while contemplating a Christmas list. Not wanting to jinx things like usual, she decided she'd write the things needed for a proper Christmas on lines, top to bottom, in her head. She started with the list for food, which was kind of a shopping list, working backwards from sweet to savoury because really she was still a kid and couldn't think about what you needed for cooking when in her mind's eye she could buy cakes and ice cream and ice-cream cakes.

She made the tea and carried the two mugs into her father's room and put one on his bedside table and carried the other to the chair.

'So who's this friend then?' she asked.

'A long lost, you wouldn't know um.'

Ennor watched him pick up the mug with both hands and despite its heat he took a big swig and winced as he swallowed it down. 'That's good.' He smiled and she nodded and sipped at her own.

They drank in silence and Ennor watched his hands cradle the mug like a broken bird, still calloused and scarred from a lifetime in the fields, and she looked about the cramped room and wondered if he ever

missed the outdoors and she wanted to ask but didn't know how.

Around the room in dusty glassless frames were photos of prize bulls and favourite horses. Rosettes and trophies lined the shelves among collected crap and scrap from years of hoarding.

In his day her dad had been a proud man with a prize-winning Simmental herd to show. That time was like jelly in Ennor's memory and in all probability was gone from his.

She wondered if there would be a little money in the pot to pay for a few bales of silage from the farm in the next valley, but this was something else she kept to herself.

'Bucket needs emptyin.'

'I know, Dad.' She put her mug on the bedside table and looked at the bucket and sighed, then picked it up and carried it carefully across the room.

'Don't spill none.'

Ennor looked at her father and shook her head in disbelief. 'Int like I'm goin runnin with it now, is it?'

'Give up the cheek, girl. You int too old –'

'For the belt, I know.'

She set the heavy bucket of waste down in the hall, then closed his door and propped open the trailer door and the one in the porch before carrying the bucket through. She returned to close up behind her.

Outside the snow fell in thick muffling strips like

sheets on a washing line, and fixed blown to the hedges and fences that surrounded the farmland.

She put on her wellies and coat and stepped out into the white with the bucket swinging and threatening below. The slop pit was close enough for regular trips but far enough not to notice its stench back in the trailer and Ennor knew the path so well she could follow it easily despite the white. She held the wire-and-string handle tight and it cut into both her hands.

The pit was annexed to the side of the barn they used to house some of the furniture from the old house, stuff she couldn't flog, plus the cattle in bad weather.

She climbed the concrete block that acted as a step up to the walled hollow and found her footing on the shallow dome of ice that had thickened there, counting to three and praying to God all at once as she lifted the corrugated lid and swung the bucket up and over the side.

The familiar stink filled her nose and her mouth and throat and she gagged the same as every day and she wiped her eyes with her sleeve and jumped down into the muddy snow. She headed back towards the outside tap to swill the bucket before the water finally froze but it was too late and she kicked the tap and then the bucket. A great urge to fall back into the snow engulfed her but she swallowed the want to be a child back down into her belly with a gulp.

The snow was falling like in a full-on Christmas card

and Ennor knew the cattle would need to be brought down to the barn as soon as possible. She returned to the windy field and as she walked she snapped snow from the twine that was strung out between the hedges to guide the cattle and obediently followed the pink lines as if she too were some dumb animal.

Her gloveless hands were butcher red and the skin on her fingers shiny tight and she put them under her armpits and blew on them and hung them useless by her sides. If she had a mother, she would have been reminded not to forget her gloves when out in the cold, but she didn't and there was no point in dwelling on it.

She called out to the cows on approach and snapped a stick from the hedge to poke them from the circle of silage, glad she'd not bothered to move it because they'd eaten it gone and the soil beneath was already frosting with ice flakes.

The cold made steel-blade peaks of the hoof-tilled land that surrounded her. Snow settled all around and over the hedgerows so that she could no longer see the dark trim of moorland beyond.

'We're goin walkies,' she told the cows. 'And I don't need no nonsense so just move along now.'

They followed her out through the open gate and down the track to the barn and Ennor told them they were good girls because they were. She pushed them through the barn door and bolted it, one and two, with thoughts of the cosy stove inviting her back indoors,

then she wondered about Trip and if she might go to meet him because his lift was near enough due.

Along the track Ennor looked up to see Butch in the upstairs bedroom window of the farmhouse.

This was the room that used to be her parents' in the house that had harboured her family all the way back to the man who built it, her great-great-great-grandfather.

She waved and he waved back. 'You comin down?' she shouted.

Butch nodded and he put one finger to the rattling top pane, which meant 'Wait a minute', and she nodded and went to sit in the woodpile. She slumped against the seasoned wood and settled on one of the upended logs they used for seats, watching the snowflakes fill the potholes in the dirt track and thinking all things Christmas.

'Now you know why I suggested my old man put a roof on that thing.'

Ennor smiled when she saw Butch approaching. 'It's cosy enough.'

He sat down and undid the buttons on his parka and Ennor knew he was up to something because of the glint in his eye. 'Look what I got.'

'What?'

'Home brew. I found it in the pantry. Bin there for ever.'

'Why int it drunk?'

'The olds must have forgotten bout it.'

He passed the bottle to Ennor and she inspected the hand-written label. 'What flavour is it?' she asked as she wiped the dust away with the heel of her hand.

'Elderflower.'

'I hate elderflower, don't you?'

Butch nodded. 'Like soap.'

'Tastes like sick and more.' She dug at the cork with her penknife and took a swig and then nodded. 'Bad.'

Butch laughed and Ennor saw him wince with pain.

'What is it?'

'Nothin, just muscle strain or somethin.'

'You don't do nothin to get muscle strain 'cept read. Maybe it's liftin too much books.'

'Don't be daft.'

'Is it your chest?'

'Just leave it, would you?' He took a sip of the wine and then another. 'That is bad.' He nodded and poured the liquid into a bubble in the snow.

'Don't need no booze anyway. I've got celebratin on my mind,' said Ennor.

'What kind of celebratin?'

'The Christmas kind.'

'What you got to celebrate bout Christmas?'

Ennor smiled and linked his arm. 'Dad says he's got money comin and he aims to spend it.'

'And you believe him?' asked Butch as he pulled away.

'Why not?'

'Cus hello?'

'He don't lie. Just circumstance turns up bad some days.'

'Like a bad penny.'

'Just like it. Why you on a downer?'

'I'm not.'

'Seems that way.' She rolled herself a cigarette and passed the tin to Butch.

'You heard the news recent?' he asked.

'Heard enough of it.'

'Bad int it?'

Ennor shrugged and lit up and held the flame for him. 'I'm not worried. Don't affect us so much out here in the sticks. Things are bad here anyway.'

'No fuel, no food, no government even. I dunno, it just might.'

'You reckon? I hope not, just gettin used to a nice thought in my head.'

'What's that?'

'*Christmas*, silly.'

'Thought you had rent due.'

'Big time, but Dad said not to worry.'

Butch shook his head and Ennor ignored him. 'The power of positive thinkin.' She nodded.

'Maybe you should be careful. You're sweet and all but gullible as –'

'Don't even know what that means. Is it a good thing?'

'Means you believe everythin anyone's got to say, no matter what.'

'Like trustin?'

'Kind of.'

'Nothin wrong with trustin.'

Butch laughed and drew his hand up to his chest 'Till it brings trouble.'

'I int stupid, Butch.'

'Just sayin.'

'Well don't. I was lookin forward to tellin Trip bout Christmas and now you've gone peed on me fairy lights.'

'Don't be daft, just watchin out for my best friend.' He smiled.

Ennor liked it when he said things like that. 'You don't think Dad's gonna pay off the rent?'

Butch shrugged. He looked tired, in pain.

'Cus if he don't we're buggered, homeless and everythin.'

'You can live here in the woodpile.'

'We got the barn but I'm not livin with a load of snippy snappy rats.' She shook her head and then looked at him. 'Things will be all right, won't they?'

Butch changed the subject and asked about Trip.

'Fine, spose he is anyway. School's closin and stayin closed. Trip thinks it's great cus, you know, he don't like it for the teasin. But school's a good thing. It's a right thing when everythin else is wrong.'

Butch nodded. 'Learnin's the only thing we got as a get-out. So what bout Christmas, you made your list yet?'

Ennor smiled. 'Course.'

'Got your mind on all things fancy, I bet.'

'We int had a fancy one ever. Just a few nice things I'm plannin, for Trip, make some nice memories. I got a few of um myself in regards to Christmas.'

Butch said nice memories were better than a fancy Christmas and Ennor put her hand on his arm and then took it away. 'We gotta make the best of it, don't we? Whatever we got, one way or other.' She leant forward to look at him, to see if he wanted to talk about his stuff the way she always did about hers but his mouth was on the fag and his mind had wandered someplace else.

At the crossroads she rested on the wooden signpost and rolled a cigarette and settled herself to smoking and waiting. She kept her eyes fixed on the grey dust horizon and continued with the shopping list from earlier, with everything hot and fatty and of gargantuan proportion.

Headlights flashed occasionally through the trees and Ennor ignored them, loading an imaginary table with heavy food until an ancient Land Rover slowed to a stop in front of her.

'Ennor.' Mrs Trewithick climbed out of the front seat and levered it forward for Trip to scramble from the back.

'Wow, miss, how many you got in there?'

'Sister, the car was skiddin. We nearly died.' Trip linked his hand into the loop of his sister's arm and jumped for attention. 'And there's no more school, ever.'

'Hi, buddy, looks like you're gonna have a long Christmas. Is that right?' she asked.

Mrs Trewithick nodded. 'No fuel. No heating. Best thing is to keep listening to the radio. I'm sure things will be back to normal soon enough.' She smiled and passed Ennor a letter and she looked like she was on the brink of crying.

'And look, Mrs Trewithick gave me these hikers.' Trip kicked snow into the air to show off his new shoes.

Ennor crossed her arms and pulled up proud. 'There's no need for that, miss. We was goin shoppin soon enough, weren't we, buddy?'

'They were my son's. Honestly, he barely wore them. Grow so fast, don't they?' She closed the car door on the screaming children and took a step towards Ennor in an attempt at privacy.

'Well that's great, Mrs Trewithick. Thank you, really.'

'You look after yourself, Ennor.' She smiled and nodded towards the letter. 'It won't be for long.'

Ennor smiled and said something about winter not being a for ever thing.

She told Trip to thank his teacher again and she pulled him off the lane towards the track.

'You've got my number, Ennor. If there's anything I can help with, please let me know.'

'Thanks, miss.' She pocketed the letter and turned to put an arm around Trip's shoulder and she told herself not to think badly of Mrs Trewithick because she didn't mean to interfere.

'Fine boots you got there, buddy. Winter boots, int they?'

Trip smiled up at her. 'It's gonna be like a real Christmas, snow and everythin.' He danced out into the powder that had banked against the verge and and his heels kicked happy hope towards the storm. Ennor skipped after him. She tried to recall what it was like to be a kid but it felt unfamiliar to her, a briefly glanced at movie starting with the slaughter that led Dad to drink and the baby that led Mum to leave.

They raced down the track to the courtyard in front of the farmhouse and Ennor hinted more and more that it was going to be the best Christmas ever.

'Like how best?'

'I dunno, best food, best pressies, a snowman out in the yard.'

'I don't like snowmen. They scare me.'

'Well whatever you like.' She scooped two handfuls of snow into a ball and threw it at him as she ran to the trailer.

'Hey!' Trip ran after her but when he got to the porch she was already inside and she refused to let him in until he threw the snowball he held behind his back into the wind.

Trip sat by the stove and stripped to his vest and pants while Ennor hung the wet clothes on the line that drooped from one end of the cramped room to the other.

'You need to take them boots off too. You look a right sight in your undies with them big boots stickin out.'

Trip laughed and bent to undo the laces and Ennor helped.

'Miss tied um double-knot tight.'

'You need to stick some sheets from the free ads into the toe, ball um up tight and leave um be and they'll be dry in no time.'

Ennor made them mugs of hot squash and took down the tin of oat biscuits she'd been saving for the end of term. 'These are a bit soft so dunk um in your juice and you won't know the difference.'

They sat close to the stove and Ennor quizzed her brother about his day as he petted his boots, turning them in his hands like found objects.

'Fine boots.' He smiled to himself.

'And what happens if you look after your boots?' his sister asked.

'They'll look after you.'

'That's right. Never dry straight without paper and a good dab of wax if you got it.'

'And leave the wax on for an hour.'

'That's right, buddy, you got it.'

'And what if you don't have wax?'

'Rub a banana skin over it.'

This answer always made Trip laugh. 'We int got no bananas.' He grinned. 'Not since a long, time, sister. Shops are closin and everythin.'

'We don't have a lot of things and never have so never mind bout that. What I tell you bout listnin in on older kids talk?' She lifted his chin to show she was serious.

'Don't,' he answered.

'Don't is right. It's gossip and it's rubbish and worse. Shops closin or no don't mean a thing.'

Ennor emptied his school bag to add it to the washing line and she was glad to see he'd brought home reading books because reading was good and she laid them out on the little table along with the plastic horse he carried everywhere and his jotter and pencil case. Then she remembered the letter and settled back in the chair to read it.

Letters used to be about school trips and term dates but not any more. Ennor read them and kept them in a card file in a box under the bed but she knew this one was different as soon as it was pulled from the envelope. 'Social Services' was writ large at the top of the page and Ennor read the words over and then 'Trip', 'institution' and 'vulnerable' and she balled it and shoved it deep into her pocket.

She looked to see if Trip had noticed the letter but he hadn't and she watched him show his horse the new boots. She would not give up her baby brother no matter how bad things got and she wondered why social services were bothering with them when there were a million families in the same situation and worse with the men street fighting just for the sake of it and

everyone without money and roofs. What kind of an institution was it anyway?

At least her dad was a man allergic to trouble. He'd know what to do. Ennor knew he was no angel but he had wings enough to get them out of trouble in the past and she wondered about social services and if telling him was a tick against good or bad. She pushed the biscuit stodge around in her mouth and pretended that everything would be fine, but her stomach churned and she spat the lump into her hand and ran outside to be sick.