

7. The House by the Sea

"Oh, Annemarie," Ellen said, with awe in her voice, "it is beautiful,"

Annemarie looked around and nodded her head in agreement. The house and the meadows that surrounded it were so much a part of her childhood, a part of her life, that she didn't often look at them with fresh eyes. But now she did, seeing Ellen's pleasure. And it was true. They were beautiful.

The little red-roofed farmhouse was very old, its chimney crooked and even the small, shuttered windows tilted at angles. A bird's nest, wispy with straw, was half hidden in the corner where the roof met the wall above a bedroom window. Nearby, a gnarled tree was still speckled with a few apples now long past ripe.

Mama and Kirsti had gone inside, but Annemarie and Ellen ran across the high-grassed meadow, through the late wildflowers. From nowhere, a gray kitten appeared and ran beside them, pouncing here and there upon imagined mice, pausing to lick its paws, and then darting off again. It pretended to ignore the girls, but looked back often to be certain that they were still there, apparently pleased to have playmates.

The meadow ended at the sea, and the gray water licked there at damp brown grass flattened by the wind and bordered by

smooth heavy stones.

"I have never been this close to the sea," Ellen said.

"Of course you have. You've been to the harbor in Copenhagen a million times."

Ellen laughed. "I mean the *real* sea, the way it is here. Open like this—a whole world of water."

Annemarie shook her head in amazement. To live in Denmark, a country surrounded by water, and never to have stood at its edge?

"Your parents are really city people, aren't they?"

Ellen nodded. "My mother is afraid of the ocean," she said, laughing. "She says it is too big for her. And too cold!"

The girls sat on a rock and took off their shoes and socks. They tiptoed across the damp stones and let the water touch their feet. It *was* cold. They giggled and stepped back.

Annemarie leaned down and picked up a brown leaf that floated back and forth with the movement of the water.

"Look," she said. "This leaf may have come from a tree in Sweden. It could have blown from a tree into the sea, and floated all the way across. See over there?" she said, pointing. "See the land? Way across there? That's Sweden."

Ellen cupped one hand over her eyes and looked across the water at the misty shoreline that was another country. "It's not so very far," she said.

"Maybe," Annemarie suggested, "standing over there are two girls just our age, looking across and saying, 'That's Denmark!'"

They squinted into the hazy distance, as if they might see Swedish children standing there and looking back. But it was too far. They saw only the hazy strip of land and two small boats bobbing up and down in the gray ruffles of separating water.

"I wonder if one of those is your Uncle Henrik's boat," Ellen said.

"Maybe. I can't tell. They're too far away. Uncle Henrik's boat is named the *Ingeborg*," she told Ellen, "for Mama."

Ellen looked around. "Does he keep it right here? Does he tie it up so that it won't float away?"

Annemarie laughed. "Oh, no. In town, at the harbor, there's a big dock, and all the fishing boats go and come from there. That's where they unload their fish. You should smell it! At night they are all there, anchored in the harbor."

"Annemarie! Ellen!" Mama's voice came across the meadow. The girls looked around, and saw her waving to them. They turned,

picked up their shoes, and began walking toward the house. The kitten, who had settled comfortably on the stony shore, rose immediately and followed them.

"I took Ellen down to show her the sea," Annemarie explained when they reached the place where Mama waited. "She'd never been that close before! We started to wade, but it was too cold. I wish we had come in summer so we could swim."

"It's cold even then," Mama said. She looked around. "You didn't see anyone, did you? You didn't talk to anyone?"

Annemarie shook her head. "Just the kitten." Ellen had picked it up, and it lay purring in her arms as she stroked its small head and talked to it softly.

"I meant to warn you. You must stay away from people while we are here."

"But there's no one around here," Annemarie reminded her.

"Even so. If you see anyone at all—even someone you know, one of Henrik's friends—it is better if you come in the house. It is too difficult—maybe even dangerous—to explain who Ellen is."

Ellen looked up and bit her lip. "There aren't soldiers here, too?" she asked.

Mama sighed. "I'm afraid there are soldiers everywhere. And

especially now. This is a bad time.

"Come in now and help me fix supper. Henrik will be home soon. Watch the step there; it's loose. Do you know what I have done? I found enough apples for applesauce. Even though there is no sugar, the apples are sweet. Henrik will bring home some fish and there is wood for the fire, so tonight we will be warm and well fed."

"It is not a bad time, then," Annemarie told her. "Not if there is applesauce."

Ellen kissed the kitten's head and let it leap from her arms to the ground. It darted away and disappeared in the tall grass. They followed Mama into the house.

That night, the girls dressed for bed in the small upstairs bedroom they were sharing, the same bedroom that had been Mama's when she was a little girl. Across the hall, Kirsti was already asleep in the wide bed that had once belonged to Annemarie's grandparents.

Ellen touched her neck after she had put on Annemarie's flower-sprigged nightgown, which Mama had packed.

"Where is my necklace?" she asked. "What did you do with it?"

"I hid it in a safe place," Annemarie told her. "A very secret place where no one will ever find it. And I will keep it there for you

until it is safe for you to wear it again."

Ellen nodded. "Papa gave it to me when I was very small," she explained.

She sat down on the edge of the old bed and ran her fingers along the handmade quilt that covered it. The flowers and birds, faded now, had been stitched onto the quilt by Annemarie's great-grandmother many years before.

"I wish I knew where my parents are," Ellen said in a small voice as she outlined one of the appliqued birds with her finger.

Annemarie didn't have an answer for her. She patted Ellen's hand and they sat together silently. Through the window, they could see a thin, round slice of moon appear through the clouds, against the pale sky. The Scandinavian night was not very dark yet, though soon, when winter came, the night would be not only dark but very long, night skies beginning in the late afternoon and lasting through morning.

From downstairs, they could hear Mama's voice, and Uncle Henrik's, talking, catching up on news. Mama missed her brother when she hadn't seen him for a while, Annemarie knew. They were very close. Mama always teased him gently for not marrying; she asked him, laughing, when they were together, whether he had found a good wife yet, one who would keep his house tidier. Henrik teased back, and told Mama that she should come to Gilleleje to

live again so that he wouldn't have to do all the chores by himself.

For a moment, to Annemarie, listening, it seemed like all the earlier times, the happy visits to the farm in the past with summer daylight extending beyond bedtime, with the children tucked away in the bedrooms and the grownups downstairs talking.

But there was a difference. In the earlier times, she had always overheard laughter. Tonight there was no laughter at all.

8. There Has Been a Death

Through a haze of dreams Annemarie heard Henrik rise and leave the house, headed for the barn with his milking pail, at daybreak. Later, when she woke again, it was morning. She could hear birds calling outside, one of them close by the window in the apple tree; and she could hear Mama below, in the kitchen, talking to Kirsti.

Ellen was still asleep. The night before, so shortened by the soldiers in the Copenhagen apartment, seemed long ago. Annemarie rose quietly so that she wouldn't wake her friend. She pulled on her clothes and went down the narrow, curved staircase to find her sister kneeling on the kitchen floor trying to make the gray kitten drink water from a bowl.

"Silly," she said. "Kittens like milk, not water."

"I am teaching this one new habits," Kirsti explained importantly. "And I have named him Thor, for the God of Thunder."

Annemarie burst out laughing. She looked at the tiny kitten, who was shaking his head, irritated at his wet whiskers as Kirsti kept trying to dip his face to the water. "God of Thunder?" Annemarie said. "He looks as if he would run and *hide* if there were a thunderstorm!"

"He has a mother someplace who would comfort him, I imagine," Mama said. "And when he wants milk, he'll find his mama."

"Or he could go visit the cow," Kirsti said.

Although Uncle Henrik no longer raised crops on the farm, as his parents had, he still kept a cow, who munched happily on the meadow grass and gave a little milk each day in return. Now and then he was able to send cheese into Copenhagen to his sister's family. This morning, Annemarie noticed with delight, Mama had made oatmeal, and there was a pitcher of cream on the table. It was a very long time since she had tasted cream. At home they had bread and tea every morning.

Mama followed Annemarie's eyes to the pitcher. "Fresh from Blossom," she said. "Henrik milks her every morning before he leaves for the boat.

"And," she added, "there's butter, too. Usually not even Henrik has butter, but he managed to save a little this time."

"Save a little from what?" Annemarie asked, spooning oatmeal into a flowered bowl. "Don't tell me the soldiers try to—what's the word?—*relocate* butter, too?" She laughed at her own joke.

But it wasn't a joke at all, though Mama laughed ruefully. "They do," she said. "They relocate all the farmers' butter, right into the

stomach of their army! I suppose that if they knew Henrik had kept this tiny bit, they would come with guns and march it away, down the path!"

Kirsti joined their laughter, as the three of them pictured a mound of frightened butter under military arrest. The kitten darted away when Kirsti's attention was distracted, and settled on the windowsill. Suddenly, here in this sunlit kitchen, with cream in a pitcher and a bird in the apple tree beside the door—and out in the Kattegat, where Uncle Henrik, surrounded by bright blue sky and water, pulled in his nets filled with shiny silver fish—suddenly the specter of guns and grim-faced soldiers seemed nothing more than a ghost story, a joke with which to frighten children in the dark.

Ellen appeared in the kitchen doorway, smiling sleepily, and Mama put another flowered bowl of steaming oatmeal on the old wooden table.

"*Cream,*" Annemarie said, gesturing to the pitcher with a grin.

All day long the girls played out of doors under the brilliant clear sky and sun. Annemarie took Ellen to the small pasture beyond the barn and introduced her to Blossom, who gave a lazy, rough-textured lick to the palm of Ellen's hand when she extended it timidly. The kitten scampered about and chased flying insects

across the meadow. The girls picked armfuls of wildflowers dried brown, now, by the early fall chill, and arranged them in pots and pitchers until the table tops were crowded with their bouquets.

Inside the house, Mama scrubbed and dusted, tsk-tsking at Uncle Henrik's untidy housekeeping. She took the rugs out to the clothesline and beat them with a sticky scattering dust into the air.

"He needs a wife," she said, shaking her head, and attacked the old wooden floors with a broom while the rugs aired.

"Just look at this," she said, opening the door to the little-used formal living room with its old-fashioned furniture. "He *never* dusts." And she picked up her cleaning rags.

"And, Kirsti," she added, "the God of Thunder made a very small rain shower in the corner of the kitchen floor. Keep an eye on him."

Late in the afternoon, Uncle Henrik came home. He grinned when he saw the newly cleaned and polished house, the double doors to the living room wide open, the rugs aired, and the windows washed.

"Henrik, you need a wife," Mama scolded him.

Uncle Henrik laughed and joined Mama on the steps near the kitchen door. "Why do I need a wife, when I have a sister?" he asked in his booming voice.

Mama sighed, but her eyes were twinkling. "And you need to stay home more often to take care of the house. This step is broken, and there is a leaking faucet in the kitchen. And—"

Henrik was grinning at her, shaking his head in mock dismay. "And there are mice in the attic, and my brown sweater has a big moth hole in the sleeve, and if I don't wash the windows soon—"

They laughed together.

"Anyway," Mama said, "I have opened every window, Henrik, to let the air in, and the sunlight. Thank goodness it is such a beautiful day."

"Tomorrow will be a day for fishing," Henrik said, his smile disappearing.

Annemarie, listening, recognized the odd phrase. Papa had said something like it on the telephone. "Is the weather good for fishing, Henrik?" Papa had asked. But what did it mean? Henrik went fishing every day, rain or shine. Denmark's fishermen didn't wait for sunny days to take their boats out and throw their nets into the sea. Annemarie, silent, sitting with Ellen under the apple tree, watched her uncle.

Mama looked at him. "The weather is right?" she asked.

Henrik nodded and looked at the sky. He smelled the air. "I will

be going back to the boat tonight after supper. We will leave very early in the morning. I will stay on the boat all night."

Annemarie wondered what it would be like to be on a boat all night. To lie at anchor, hearing the sea slap against the sides. To see the stars from your place on the sea.

"You have prepared the living room?" Uncle Henrik asked suddenly.

Mama nodded. "It is cleaned, and I moved the furniture a bit to make room.

"And you saw the flowers," she added. "I hadn't thought of it, but the girls picked dried flowers from the meadow."

"Prepared the living room for what?" Annemarie asked. "Why did you move the furniture?"

Mama looked at Uncle Henrik. He had reached down for the kitten, scampering past, and now held it against his chest and scratched its chin gently. It arched its small back with pleasure.

"Well, girls," he said, "it is a sad event, but not *too* sad, really, because she was very, very old. There has been a death, and tonight your Great-aunt Birte will be resting in the living room, in her casket, before she is buried tomorrow. It is the old custom, you know, for the dead to rest at home, and their loved ones to be with them before burial."

Kirsti was listening with a fascinated look. "Right here?" she asked. "A dead person right here?"

Annemarie said nothing. She was confused. This was the first she had heard of a death in the family. No one had called Copenhagen to say that there had been a death. No one had seemed sad.

And—most puzzling of all—she had never heard the name before. Great-aunt Birte. *Surely* she would have known if she had a relative by that name. Kirsti might not; Kirsti was little and didn't pay attention to such things.

But Annemarie did. She had always been fascinated by her mother's stories of her own childhood. She remembered the names of all the cousins, the great-aunts, and -uncles: who had been a tease, who had been a grouch, who had been such a scold that her husband had finally moved away to a different house, though they continued to have dinner together every night. Such wonderful, interesting stories, filled with the colorful personalities of her mother's family.

And Annemarie was quite, quite certain, though she said nothing. There was no Great-aunt Birte. She didn't exist.