

A writer, weaving fantasies about the daughter she once relinquished for adoption, faces a starkly different reality when the young woman re-enters her life and takes them both, and others, on an unexpected journey of emotional risk-taking, healing and love.

The Bird Menders

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THE BIRD MENDERS

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Chapter 1

Marsha started having doubts as soon as she left Rome, heading south. By Salerno, the feeling was so strong that she almost jumped off the train and booked into a hotel instead. But she is glad, now, that she didn't. She loves this place already.

Especially the floor. She has always enjoyed the look and feel of smooth, hard floors. They make everything feel so clean and spacious.

Here, the sun is shining on a bowl of black grapes on the table, and the space is empty, airy, sparsely furnished and totally devoid of personal associations. It is perfect. Almost before she has put the suitcase down her feet have slipped out of her sandals on to the warm parquet.

The French windows are open. “...*per rinfrescare l'aria*,” Anna is explaining. (To refresh the air). There is a light breeze coming through them and a gentle, flowery scent—possibly jasmine. There are no curtains. Marsha is grateful for that. She doesn't care much for curtains.

“*Grazie*,” she says to Anna. And means it.

Yes, this is the ideal place. Why did she ever doubt it would be? And she has as much right to be here as much as anyone else. As much right as *he* would have. It is important to keep reminding herself of that. If she doesn't she might start feeling foolish. In any case, he left here when he was twenty. He told her so. Why even think of him anyway? That's old, old history. Best not even to think about it.

The pottery bowl is the color of the sky. The dining table has a marble top. Beyond the French windows, beneath the terra cotta glow of the rooftops, the sea is glinting. She thinks she can even hear the waves breaking, far below. Hard floors, sunshine, sweet grapes, the ocean...yes, *grazie*. Thank you, thank you, *Grazie mille, grazie tanto...*

Anna is trying to show her how the stove works and which cupboard holds what and how to secure the bolt on the glass doors and Marsha is nodding and thanking her but in fact she is not attending very well. She is following Anna around the room and saying “mm-hmm” and “*va bene*” in all the appropriate places, but inside she feels impatient to be alone. She wants to walk out on to the terrace and feel the sun on her skin and the breeze from the ocean stirring the little hairs on her arms. She wants to claim the space and to dance back and forth across this wide, bright room in her bare feet, singing to herself, out loud. But the first thing she does, when Anna finally

leaves, is to eat the first grape from the bowl—slowly, reverently, as though it were a communion wafer, pressing it gently between her teeth until it explodes and its fragrant sweetness washes across her tongue.

“So let me get this straight. You’re planning to go to Italy for the whole month of September, right?”

“Yes.”

“Why September?”

“Because that’s when the grapes are ripe.”

Why ever did she give Peter that stupid answer? It tumbled out of her mouth before she thought about it. And with Peter, that is not always a wise thing to do. She should know that by now. Even though when she said it he was eighteen miles away from her, sitting in his neat little suburban villa, Marsha could see the tightness of his mouth, the nervous pumping of his right leg that he has always done whenever he is feeling tense. He was probably using that fancy, fake-old-fashioned phone that sits on the desk in his study—the neat and tidy desk with the leather-edged blotter. Pristine, white blotting paper. No doodles. She knows that Peter never doodles. He has always been the neat one. Teeth brushed, hair combed, and school tie straight as an arrow, shoes polished, homework conscientiously completed. Not like Mike, whose hair was forever tousled and whose shirt seemed to leap out of his waistband of its own accord, a minute and a half after she had tucked it in. So incredibly different, her two boys.

“So you’re going all the way to Italy, just to eat grapes? They sell them at Sainsbury’s you know.”

Why was he being so bitchy? Marsha was feeling defensive. She took a deep breath. “Peter, I know that sounds silly to you. But you see—”

“If it’s what you want, Mother,” he said, interrupting her, “who am I to say? But you realize you’ll miss Jacob’s birthday, don’t you?”

Oh shit. So that’s it. Yes of course. September 12th. Jacob’s third birthday coming up and she had not even remembered. Oops! Neglectful grandmother. Priorities all wrong. Humble pie indicated.

“Oh Peter I’m *so* sorry. It totally slipped my mind when I made the booking and it was only later I realized...” (Liar. You didn’t remember till just this moment, did you?) “It’s just that time goes so fast. I can hardly believe he is almost three already.”

Peter grunted.

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“I’ll bring him back something special from Italy. He’s too little to notice the difference anyway—whether I’m there or not, I mean. And it will be nice to have a present on a different day.”

“If you say so.”

“Peter...”

“What?”

“I’m sorry.”

Silence.

“I really am.”

“OK.”

She hung up the phone. “Shit,” she said. “Oh shit, shit *shit!*”

Then she lifted the receiver and dialed another number.

“I’ve gone and done it again, Chris. Been a neglectful grandmother.”

Christine laughed. “What have you done this time?”

“Booked to go to Italy and totally forgot it’s Jacob’s birthday on the twelfth of September. Peter’s pissed off with me. In that tight-lipped, long-suffering way of his of course. He’s Noel all over again. It drives me nuts.”

“Did you tell him why you’re going?”

“I started to. But then I decided just to apologize. He wouldn’t understand anyway.”

“Don’t worry,” her friend said. “He’ll get over it.”

It was only two weeks ago, that conversation, but already she can feel it fading, getting archived in the ‘Peter’ file, sub-heading ‘Communications.’ England is way back along hundreds of miles of railway track, disappearing in the mist. Here, the sky and the sea are a bright, clear blue and the sun is shining.

Marsha explores the apartment. The main bedroom has a door to the terrace, a double bed with a white coverlet and a half-moon-shaped wicker bedhead, attached to the wall. She sits on the edge of the bed and bounces a little. Good. Nice and firm. All the walls are white and bare of pictures. There is a wooden chair and a dressing-table with a large mirror. Marsha pauses to look at herself in the mirror. It is the first time she has seen her reflection properly since Paris and she is surprised at how fresh and uncrumpled she still looks, despite all those hours on trains. Though in jeans and a T-shirt, with a cotton sweater still tied around her waist, there is not much to crumple. Her springy mass of fast-graying hair is doing its usual unruly thing. The weariness of travel seems to have accentuated the deepening lines on her face a little, but what the hell? She’ll get some good

sleep here. Anyway, she is getting used to her wrinkles nowadays. And she quite likes the look of herself at this time of year, still with a summer's tan. Marsha re-adjusts her glasses, grins at her mirror self, unties the sweater from her waist, where it has become warm and slightly damp, and tosses it on the bed.

The other bedroom has twin beds, with blue covers. She passes through it without interest and goes to inspect the bathroom. Whoever designed the bathroom at Casa Rosetta obviously believed that if a few colored tiles amongst the white look smart, then forty of them, randomly placed, must therefore look even smarter. The result: a beautifully appointed bathroom with a bad case of chickenpox. Marsha wonders how you say "less is more" in Italian. Maybe you just don't say it.

The terrace, however, is divine. Whoever Rosetta is, or was, whatever points she loses on bathroom aesthetics she more than makes up for in the terrace department. Right now, the whole, huge expanse of it is blessed by sunshine, except for the criss-crossed shadows of the pergola, and its pink cement surface is warm to her bare feet. In one corner, close to the railings, there are some wicker chairs set around a table. Two stone planters hold pelargoniums with bright, scarlet flowers and jasmine that trails dustily out on to the cement.

From here, the view is wonderful. Marsha spins in a slow circle...rooftops, sea, glittering horizon, distant, olive-clad hills. The twenty-first century it may be, but from here you'd never know it.

She fetches the bowl of grapes and settles comfortably into one of the wicker chairs. Later, when the sun is lower in the sky, she will venture out to explore the town, buy some food, get her bearings. Later, she will unpack her suitcase, plug in her laptop, make plans. But right now there is only the sunshine and the comfort, the sweetness of grape juice and, for once, the blessed absence of not only the painful, obsessive thoughts that have been haunting her these past few months but of any thoughts whatsoever. Except, of course, that it is hard to sit so near the ocean and eat grapes without those old memories seeping in.

* * *

Marsha first saw Cesare on the beach, taking a photograph of a fat woman in a pink, candy-striped swimsuit. She studied him from behind her sunglasses. Handsome, with dark, wavy hair, dark eyes and a little dimple in

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the centre of his chin. She thought he looked like a film star. Cesare probably thought so too, judging by the confident way he moved and the way he looked at women on the beach as though he knew they would all want to go to bed with him if they had half a chance.

It was a Polaroid camera of some kind. He took the picture out of the back and fiddled with it. The woman was laughing. After she had inspected the photograph carefully and shown it to her companion in the next deck chair, she took a purse from her pink, toweling beach bag and handed him some money. He offered her change and she waved it away, still laughing, and saying something Marsha could not hear. He walked to the next cluster of deck chairs.

Navy blue shorts and a white T-shirt that showed off his tan to perfection. Nice legs. He was working his way along the beach, heading gradually in her direction. Marsha pretended to read her book. The chair next to her was empty except for Mandy's red towel with pictures of surfboards on it. Mandy had gone for a swim.

Marsha willed herself not to look up. It was only when his shadow fell across her book that she raised her head and met his gaze. Dark brown eyes. A sexy mouth.

"Buon giorno, signorina."

"Hi."

"Inglese?"

Marsha nodded.

"Parla Italiano?"

"No."

"Parlez-vous francais?"

She hesitated. She had not spoken French since Form Five. That was more than three years ago, and she had never been all that good at it anyway. But since she knew no Italian at all except yes and no, please and thank you, and where are the toilets, this seemed to be the only viable option.

So she said, *"Um...un petit peu."* (A little bit). And Cesare sat down beside her.

That was how it began. Over the next thirteen days, they got to know each other—sketchily, to be sure, but well enough to get by. With Marsha's halting, unpracticed, high school French and Cesare's strange mix of French, expressive hand gestures and the odd, Italian phrase or two, they managed to exchange some details about themselves, laboriously, stiltedly, like children writing letters to a new pen-pal.

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By day, he plied his trade along the crowded beach, photographing the pink-fleshed foreigners on their fortnight's packaged vacations and selling them the prints at inflated prices. Marsha swam and sunbathed, read novels, ate ripe grapes from a paper bag and watched Cesare from her deckchair, her nipples poking hard through her swimsuit whenever she thought about what was under those navy-blue shorts he always wore. Sometimes he put his camera away for a while and followed Marsha into the waves, and when they were both up to their armpits, he would press himself against her, teasing her with salty kisses and secret, submarine explorations of her body.

Mandy was there less and less often, for she had found herself a holiday lover also—a young German tourist called Wolf who spoke good English. Marsha suspected that they spent most of their time in Wolf's hotel room, as Mandy's own bed was not slept in at all after the third night of their vacation.

By night, Marsha and Cesare drank wine, smoked cigarettes and danced to the latest Italian pop tunes.

E quando mezzanotte viene

Se davvero mi vuoi bene

Pensami un'ora almeno...

The music was hypnotic. Romantic. Sexy. Cesare whispered, "*Ti voglio tanto bene*" in Marsha's right ear, and when the music ended he continued to hold her close.

It was the first week of September, 1971, and the season was winding down. The grapes were huge and sweet. Boys carried them in baskets along the beach, with portable scales to weigh them on. The season had ripened too, and the last harvest of tourists was being gathered in, squeezed for the final few orders of campari and soda, or gelati, or tacky souvenirs.

There had been many women since June, Marsha knew, and the sorrow Cesare was now expressing at her imminent departure was, she suspected, more autumnal than personal. She was his last ripe fruit of the year, for the trains would be arriving with empty carriages now, the beach umbrellas would soon be coming down and the deckchairs would be folded flat and packed away. But she gave herself to the story, even though she knew it was only a story, an imaginary romance, a movie in which they were both rather corny actors, choosing to pretend, for a while, that they were real. It was only a vacation, after all. Not real life.

They even exchanged addresses. And for a few weeks afterwards, they dutifully wrote love letters in their school French, referring obliquely to a future together that they both knew perfectly well was never likely to happen.

The girls in the office were suitably impressed.

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“Oh wow! He's gorgeous.”

“You lucky thing. I could go for him.”

“I bet he was a good kisser.”

“Ask him if he has a brother, will you?”

“Italians are *so* sexy.”

It did occur to Marsha, who was given to deep reflection at times, even back in those days, to wonder why they all kept up this illusion of languorous, Mediterranean romance when surely anyone who had tried it would have discovered that the sex itself was disappointing and somewhat bruisingly peremptory and that the smoldering glances and whispered endearments all ended in a coupling which, in its raw urgency, turned out to be as brief and un-tender as that of the pet rabbits she had kept as a child. But then, maybe it was different for other people. You never asked about those kinds of details and no-one ever divulged them. It would have spoiled the game.

So she basked in the glow of being the latest girl in the office to find a Latin lover, and pinned a picture of Cesare on the wall next to her desk, where her colleagues glanced at it more often than she did.

The letters stopped coming quite soon. So, unfortunately, did her periods.

* * *

It is only when a family of house martins swoops low over where she is sitting, uttering their shrill calls, that Marsha realizes she has been dozing. “Thanks for the wake-up call,” she says to the birds. “I don't remember ordering one but thanks anyway.”

She turns her head to see where they have gone and notices, for the first time, the cluster of mud nests clinging to the outside wall. As quickly as they arrived, the birds take wing again, swirling and diving in the cloudless sky. Higher up, seagulls are flying too, in slow circles.

The sun is still warm. Marsha notes how much that fact is pleasing her right now. As though the warmth were something especially put on for her benefit. Like a luxury service for which one has paid extra, in a moment of impulsive self-indulgence. It still surprises her that the edge of a country, the place where land and sea meet and seagulls fly, can also be warm and sweet and luxurious instead of cold, windy and—what was the word her father used to use? 'Bracing.' Yes, that was it.

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She can still see the empty, windswept sea front, the leaden sky, the parallel rows of wooden breakwaters and his navy blue serge overcoat and shiny leather gloves. She can still feel the blowing sand stinging the backs of her legs and hear her mother's voice behind her. "Come along Martha. You can walk faster than that." And she can still remember the gray feeling of disappointment and of wanting to cry but not quite knowing why. Except that 'the seaside' was so different from the picture in her book—the one with the buckets and spades and the children and a bright golden sun in a bright blue sky—and she felt cheated somehow. However, she reminds herself now, at five years old you don't understand the concept of 'cheated'. You just feel gray instead of blue and gold, and you think about how much the sand is pricking your legs and you wish your mother was not talking to you in that same weary, half impatient, half resigned way that she talks to you at home. As though you are a burden she has to bear.

Of course she did not put words to all of that until much, much later. It is only recently that she has found herself so often looking back across her life, wondering who this person really is, this Martha/Marsha, underneath the half-century-old pile of remembered stories and unexamined longings.

The martins swoop in again. One leaves a small, wet calling card, just at the edge of the table. Marsha smiles. "Thanks a lot," she says, "I love you, too."

* * *

"Are you on the pill?" was one of the first questions Harry had asked her, once it became obvious to both of them that they were going to finish up in bed together—probably quite soon, if they could work out the logistics of where and when.

"No. I know lots of women are using it these days, but I'm not."

"Why not? It's supposed to be foolproof, isn't it?"

"Well yes, it's supposed to be. But it's only been around a little while. Heaven knows what the long-term effects are. Anyway, I just don't fancy messing around with my body's hormones, that's all."

"Oh. Well we'll need to sort that, before—"

"We could use condoms, couldn't we?"

She could hardly believe they were having this conversation. It seemed so...premeditated, somehow. So unromantic.

He made a face. "That's like having a shower with your raincoat on."

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“My ex-fiancé and I used the rhythm method. He was a Catholic, you see.”

Harry raised his eyebrows. “I thought Catholics disapproved of premarital sex.”

“Well they do. But—”

Harry laughed in that mirthless, cynical way of his that made her feel little and stupid.

“You should get a Dutch cap. That’s what Jan has.”

“Where did she get it?”

“She went to some clinic in Lisson Grove. Ages ago. That’s what you should do.”

Sometimes, in a weird way, Harry reminded Marsha of her father. Perhaps it was the humourlessness. Or the way he could so quickly make her feel small and silly.

They said no more about contraception, and Marsha went on taking her temperature every day and keeping a chart.

“Anyway, if ever you did get pregnant,” he said one day, “I know where to get these pills. I had to get them for Jan once. Before she got her cap thingy. That’s how I know they work.”

They had been careful. She had watched the dates and calculated the safe times. Everything was just fine. The pills had never been necessary.

So she fudged the dates. He had always left the planning to her anyway so it was easy to do. In any case, Harry was too busy to bother noticing that sort of thing. So when she told him she’d been due in the second week of her vacation, he believed her.

“Why the hell didn’t you tell me as soon as you got back?” His tall, thin frame loomed over her like a hastily constructed scarecrow, with his eyebrows pulled together in a frown and his eyes, behind the rimless glasses, looking darker gray than usual.

“I thought I was just late.”

Marsha was sitting on the sofa, while Harry stood. He never seemed comfortable here, in Marsha and Christine’s flat. In fact, he rarely came here. He was only here today because she had told him she had a problem that was really urgent.

“You told me you’re never late.”

“Well I never was before. I thought all the excitement of going to Italy, the foreign food...you know—”

“That’s stupid, Marsha. You should have told me straight away.”

Marsha said nothing.

He got her the pills the next day and brought them around to the flat. He was trying to look nonchalant, but she knew Harry was rattled. Babies were absolutely not part of his plans—especially babies with Marsha. Even babies with Jan, whom he still professed to love more than life itself, had never been an option.

There were five pills—huge, purplish-black things, the sort of pills you might give a horse—wrapped in tissue paper inside a small, brown, cardboard box with no label. Christ-knows what's in them, thought Marsha. But she poured herself a glass of water and swallowed all five of them, one after another. The last one stuck in her throat and she ate a slice of bread to try and push it down. They would work soon, she knew. Harry had said so. Harry was thirty-two, after all. He knew much more about almost everything than she did. Besides, the pills had worked for Jan, hadn't they?

But they didn't work for Marsha.

* * *

The town is coming to life and the shops and cafés are beginning to open their shutters again. Marsha wanders through the narrow alleyways, up and down the worn, stone steps until she is lost, then found again only to be lost once more. Against the ancient stones, small things stand out. Sunlight slanting through fern fronds. A tangle of kittens sleeping on a step. A blue plastic bucket with a leaning mop. Interesting doorways. A small, quiet square with mosaics on the wall. A large but silent bell, coated with verdigris.

Gray-haired women with lined and leathery faces nod to her as she passes, their eyes bold and black, like shiny currants. An old man dozes on a bench, his mouth half open. Some children are playing in a fountain. She spies washing hanging from high-up places and hears music, laughter, voices. In one narrow street, there is a smell of cooked fish. Two rather dusty sunflowers are trying to bloom in a planter, next to an open doorway. A woman, somewhere inside the house, is unleashing a torrent of high-pitched words at someone—probably a misbehaving child, because it is followed by the sound of wailing. The business of everyday life is being carried out all around me, Marsha thinks to herself. And I like that. It all feels so grittily *real*.

The only other person besides her who looks like a tourist is a young, blond man with red-laced walking boots. He is sitting at one of the tables

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outside the bakery, studying what appears to be a map. Something about him reminds her of that German boy, Wolf, that her friend Mandy met on that vacation of theirs in Rimini. She finished up marrying him and going to live in the Black Forest. Marsha wonders if they are still together. She lost track of Mandy some time in the 1980s. Not that they ever had much in common anyway, she and Mandy, apart from their five years' worth of shared schooldays.

She is glad she chose to come to the south, this time. Compared to those parts of northern Italy that she has visited, this is like a different country altogether. Here, there are no attempts to dress up worn and ancient walls with cascades of wisteria or bougainvillea, or to paint doorways in bold colors and hang funky signs next to them. Here, things just are as they are. Plain, bare-boned, real. Here is Italy as she may have been way back before Christopher Columbus discovered America and Thomas Cook created tourism.

It makes Marsha feel almost guilty for coming here. As though this place really is one of those 'best-kept secrets' that travel articles tell you about and she is the one who has discovered it—and by doing so is starting the whole, sad process of ruining it.

She also feels a bit conspicuous. Whilst it is easy to be anonymous in the city, here there is an undisguised curiosity in the eyes of the passers-by. Back home in London, she thinks, you could walk down the street with a pair of antlers on your head, or a clown's nose, painted bright red, and no-one would give you more than a tiny, furtive glance—so tiny and furtive that you probably wouldn't even notice it. Or else they would ignore you altogether, their eyes parked on the pavement, ears glued to one of these new iPod things, probably, or talking into a cell phone, their minds busy somewhere else, deep inside their portable cocoons of individuality. Here, it is different.

But she is glad to be here, nonetheless. And despite that lingering feeling of private embarrassment about her choice of this particular town, right now it is easy to dismiss that as unimportant and to revel in the delight of exploring these new surroundings and in the fact that she feels so surprisingly good.

Although the sun has lost much of its strength, she is sweating hard now. Not just from the hot flashes that are part of her life these days, but from all the walking. Marsha is aware that she is beginning to flag. Time to do some shopping and go back. I won't go to a restaurant tonight, she decides. I'll get a pizza and I'll take it back to Casa Rosetta and eat it there, in the quiet. She has noticed several pizza signs. The thought of pizza makes her hungry. To

hell with her wheat and dairy allergies. She is on vacation. (Well sort of.) She will live dangerously.

As she turns a corner to return to the main square, Marsha's eye is suddenly taken by something in the window of a small shop. She walks up to the window to peer at it more closely. It is a clay figure of a woman, about ten inches high, unpainted. The woman's head is slightly inclined and her arms are reaching out and down, as though she is about to embrace someone or something. The face is carefully etched and the features are serene and beautiful. What an unusual piece, Marsha thinks. There is a refinement about it which contrasts strongly with most of the other items in the window—the crudely decorated china, the garish glass ornaments and the imported bits and pieces.

She walks into the shop and pays forty euros for the statue, which the young woman behind the counter wraps in a sheet of newspaper and places carefully in a plastic bag.

“*Grazie*,” says Marsha.

“*Prego signora*,” says the young woman, barely glancing at her. She picks up a cell phone from the counter and her thumb is already dancing deftly among the buttons as Marsha closes the shop door behind her and sets off to find supper.

* * *

Marsha had never felt more than slightly guilty about her relationship with Harry Latimer. Anyway, she reasoned to herself, it was not as though Harry and Jan were actually *married*. Even though they had told Elsie, their landlady, that they were. Harry had never exactly explained why they maintained that particular fiction. It was not as though living together without the seal of holy matrimony was all that unusual any more, especially in 1970s London. But since Elsie took such a huge interest in their lives, it was too late to change the story. Especially now that Jan was on tour in Australia and Elsie was taking such a keen interest in the wellbeing of his 'wife' on the other side of the world.

“And how is the show going? I bet they are selling out every night.”

“Oh yes, they are doing very well.”

“When do you think she will be back? Will they extend the run, do you suppose?”

“I don't know. They might.”

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“Oh you must miss her so terribly.”

Any information he gave Elsie would, no doubt, be juicily relayed to friends less fortunate in their acquaintance with people in 'The Business.'

“When I told her Jan’s leading man broke his ankle falling out of a boat on the Murray river because he’d drunk too much Aussie beer, I’m sure she dined off that for weeks. She should have been a gossip columnist for ‘Variety’ or something.”

Harry's anecdotes were entertaining, admittedly, but hearing him talk about his domestic life with Jan always seemed to bring up that awful nose-to-the-window feeling. When she was a child, she used to have a recurring dream about that, and sometimes the dream still came, though not as frequently. In the dream, she was always a little girl looking through a window into another little girl’s playroom. It was full of brightly colored toys. Dolls and dolls’ houses. The other little girl had brothers and sisters. Marsha knew they were the kind of children whose parents take them to the seaside—the blue and gold kind of seaside—with buckets and spades and buy them those pink sticks of rock with letters in.

She did see the inside of the Earl's Court flat once, but it was only for a few moments, while Harry dashed in to fetch something he had forgotten.

“You stay out here. I’ll only be a minute.”

“I want to come in with you.”

“Marsha I’m coming straight back.”

“Doesn’t matter. I’m coming too.”

“But —”

“But what? You told me they’re away, didn’t you? Elsie and her old man?”

“Yeah, they’re down in Torquay with his sister.”

“Well then?”

“Oh alright. But we’re not staying.”

“I know. You already told me that.”

She was in the flat just long enough to take in the arty posters on the walls, the fawn and cream striped cushions with tassels, the white flokati rug in front of the tiled fireplace, the flamboyant brass sculpture of a woman who looked as though she was dancing the tango on her own, and the huge bookcase full of books that Marsha wished she had time to browse. Harry hustled her out of there again with such indecent haste that it made her want to giggle. Even though, as a stage electrician, he spent more time arranging spotlights than standing in them, he seemed to think there was one

permanently trained on the eight feet of space between the black, iron railings and his smart, black, front door.

But at the shabby, upstairs flat in Hampstead that belonged to Harry's friend Don, there was no such floodlight, real or imaginary. Don's flat always felt as impersonal and easy to occupy as a hotel room. Probably because he rarely used it, now that he had met that woman down in Brighton. Here, Harry and Marsha could relax, without Harry forever looking over his shoulder.

So it was here, on Don's old, brown leather sofa, that Harry broke the news about Australia.

She should not have been as surprised as she was. Several months ago, he had mentioned that he thought Jan fancied someone in the cast. Something Jan had said in one of her letters had him deeply worried. He made noises, even back then, about maybe going there himself to see what she was up to. But Marsha thought it had all blown over. Harry told her he and Jan had talked on the phone for over an hour. (In which case, I bet Jan was paying, Marsha thought.) He seemed reassured. But now, he told her, the storm had blown up again. They had had what amounted to an argument on the telephone last Friday and at the end of it Jan had thrown down the gauntlet.

"If you can't take my word for it, then you can bloody well fly over here and see for yourself!" she had yelled at him across ten thousand miles of telephone cable. At least, that's the way Harry reported it. And, according to Harry, when he said he would love to do just that but he couldn't afford the ticket (Marsha knew he could, but Harry always cried poor) Jan said OK she would pay his fare.

"And who knows," she had allegedly added, "you might like it here. It would be a good chance to have a look. Lately I've been thinking about how it might be to live here. Permanently, I mean. There's heaps of work."

Well that had really scared Harry. He had gone straight to the travel agent and ordered the ticket. He would stay in Australia for Christmas, he informed Marsha. Maybe longer. Maybe for ever, if he liked it and they let him stay. Though of course if that did happen, he'd have to come back and pack up all their stuff.

"So I'll be leaving a week on Tuesday," he said. "I just can't say how long I'll be gone. Sorry, Marsha."

Sorry Marsha! That was all. Sorry Marsha. Never mind, Marsha, about what is going on, right this minute, in the mysterious interior of your belly, or the cyclone that is ripping through your world and turning your normally sensible, logical, decision-making mind to the consistency of jelly. Never

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mind that the first lot of pills didn't work and the second lot hasn't worked yet either and you have no idea what to do next, haven't told another soul except Christine, who let you cry all over her and then had you soak your feet in a basin of scalding hot water and take quinine tablets at the same time—also without the desired result—and you have not even the beginnings of Plan B, or rather Plan D, by now. Never mind that all your ideas about starting a new career are now starting rapidly to circle the plughole. Or that there's no way in hell you could contemplate telling your family about this, specially now your mother's ill, and you haven't a clue what is going to happen to your life. Just—sorry Marsha.

She would have yelled at him and told him what a right rotten bastard he was, but there were three good reasons why she couldn't. The first reason was somewhere in Italy—Rome now, probably, for that's where he went when the beach season in Rimini ended, to Rome to photograph the tourists around the Trevi Fountain or somewhere like that. Or maybe Florence. There was, after all, no reason on earth why Harry should take responsibility for the actions of a spermatozoon that was not even his, even if he didn't know that.

The second reason was that she had accepted the terms, hadn't she? Harry had spelled them out, right at the beginning of their affair. No strings, no obligations. She had been getting over her broken engagement to Martin and longing to be held and lusted after by someone—anyone—and Harry had been missing Jan and looking for some short-term consolation. Their needs matched perfectly. And it had been good. Weekend walks on Hampstead Heath, nice dinners together in Don's flat, good wine, great sex—at those times in the month when Marsha considered that it would be safe. All the arrangements had worked just fine. Till now.

The third reason for not yelling at Harry was that right at this moment, Marsha, who had been struggling all week with a raging queasiness, was too busy trying to get to the bathroom so that she would not throw up all over Don's threadbare, green carpet.

A writer, weaving fantasies about the daughter she once relinquished for adoption, faces a starkly different reality when the young woman re-enters her life and takes them both, and others, on an unexpected journey of emotional risk-taking, healing and love.

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