

# THE DAY OF THE STORM

ROSAMUNDE PILCHER



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# Contents

Title Page  
Copyright Notice

Chapter 1  
Chapter 2  
Chapter 3  
Chapter 4  
Chapter 5  
Chapter 6  
Chapter 7  
Chapter 8  
Chapter 9  
Chapter 10  
Chapter 11  
Chapter 12

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About the Author

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# 1

It all started on a Monday at the end of January. A dull day at a dull time of the year. Christmas and the New Year were over and forgotten and yet the new season had not started to show its face. London was cold and raw, the shops filled with empty hope and clothes “for cruising”. The trees in the park stood lacy and bare against low skies, the trodden grass beneath them dull and dead, so that it was impossible to believe that it could ever again be carpeted with drifts of purple and yellow crocus.

It was a day like any other day. The alarm woke me to darkness, but a darkness made paler by the wide expanse of the uncurtained windows, and through them I could see the top of the plane tree, illuminated by the orange glow of distant street lights.

My room was unfurnished, except for the sofa bed on which I lay, and a kitchen table which I was going to strip of paint when I had the time, and polish with a coat of beeswax. Even the floor was bare, boards stretching to the wainscoting. An orange box did duty as a bedside table, and a second one filled in for a chair.

I put out a hand and turned on the light and surveyed the desolate scene with the utmost satisfaction. It was mine. My first home. I had moved in only three weeks ago but it belonged entirely to me. With it, I could do as I pleased. Cover the white walls with posters or paint them orange. Sand the bare floor or stripe it in colour. Already I had started to acquire a proprietary interest in junk and antique shops, and could not pass one without scanning the window for some treasure that I might be able to afford. This was how the table had come into my possession, and I already had my eye on an antique gilt mirror, but had not yet plucked up the courage to go into the shop and find out how much it was going to cost. Perhaps I would hang it in the centre of the chimney breast, or on the wall opposite the window, so that the reflections of the sky and the tree would be caught, like a picture, within its ornate frame.

These pleasant imaginings took some time. I looked again at the clock, saw that it was growing late, and climbed out of bed to pad, barefooted, across the floor and into the tiny kitchen, where I lit the gas and put the kettle on to boil. The day had begun.

\* \* \*

The flat was in Fulham, the top floor of a small terrace house which belonged to Maggie and John Trent. I had met them only at Christmas, which I had spent with Stephen Forbes and his wife Mary and their large family of untidy children, in their

large and untidy house in Putney. Stephen Forbes was my boss, the owner of the Walton Street bookshop where I had been working for the past year. He had always been enormously kind and helpful towards me and when he found out, from one of the other girls, that I would be on my own for Christmas, he and Mary had immediately issued a firm invitation—more an order, really—that I should spend the three days with them. There was plenty of space, he insisted vaguely, a room in the attic, a bed in Samantha’s room, somewhere, but I wouldn’t mind, would I? And I could always help Mary baste the turkey and pick all those torn bits of tissue paper off the floor.

Considering it from this angle, I finally accepted, and had a wonderful time. There’s nothing like a family Christmas when there are children everywhere and noise and paper and presents, and a pine-smelling Christmas tree, glittering with baubles and crooked home-made decorations.

On Boxing Night, with the children safely in bed, the Forbeses threw a grown-up party, although we still seemed to continue playing childish games, and Maggie and John Trent came to this. The Trents were young marrieds, she the daughter of an Oxford don, whom Stephen had known well in his undergraduate days. She was one of those laughing, cheerful out-going people, and after she had arrived the party went with a swing. We were introduced but we didn’t manage to talk until a game of charades, when we found ourselves side by side on a sofa, trying to guess, from the most incoherent gestures, that Mary was trying to act to us, in dumb show, the title of a film. “*Rose Marie!*” somebody yelled, for no apparent reason.

“*Clockwork Orange!*”

Maggie lit a cigarette and sank back on the sofa, defeated. “It’s beyond me,” she said. She turned her dark head to look at me. “You work in Stephen’s shop, don’t you?”

“Yes.”

“I’ll come in next week and spend all my Christmas book tokens. I’ve been given dozens.”

“Lucky girl.”

“We’ve just moved into our first house, so I want lots of coffee table stuff so that all our friends think I’m wildly intelligent...” Then somebody shouted, “Maggie, it’s your turn,” and she said “Cripes,” and shot to her feet, and went stalking off to find out what she was going to have to act. I can’t remember what it was, but watching her make a cheerful fool of herself, my heart warmed to her, and I hoped that I would see her again.

\* \* \*

I did, of course. True to her word, she came into the shop a couple of days after the

holiday wearing a sheepskin coat and a long purple skirt, and carrying a bulging handbag stuffed with book tokens. I wasn't serving anybody at that particular moment and I came out from behind a neat stack of shiny-jacketed novels and said, "Hallo."

"Oh, good, there you are. I was hoping I'd find you. Can you help me?"

"Yes, of course."

Together, we chose a cookery book, a new autobiography which everybody was talking about, and a marvellously expensive volume of Impressionist paintings for the legendary coffee table. All this came to a little more than the book tokens did, so she groped around in that handbag and took out a cheque book in order to pay for the balance of the amount.

"John'll be furious," she told me happily, writing out the amount with a red felt pen. The cheque was yellow and the effect quite gay. "He says we're spending far too much money as it is. There." She turned it over to write her address. "Fourteen Bracken Road, SW6." She said it aloud in case I couldn't read her writing. "I haven't got used to writing it yet. We've only just moved in. Terribly exciting, we've bought it freehold, believe it or not. At least our parents chipped in with the deposit and John managed to con some building society or other into giving us a loan for the rest. But of course because of this, we've got to let the top floor to help pay the mortgage, but still, I suppose it'll all work out." She smiled. "You'll have to come and see it."

"I'd like to." I was wrapping her parcel, being meticulous about matching the paper and folding the corners.

She watched me. "You know, it's terribly rude, but I don't know your name. I know it's Rebecca, but Rebecca what?"

"Rebecca Bayliss."

"I suppose you don't know of a nice peaceful individual who wants an unfurnished flat?"

I looked at her. Our thoughts were so close I scarcely had to speak. I tied the knot on the parcel and snapped the string. I said, "How about me?"

"You? But are you looking for somewhere to live?"

"I wasn't until a moment ago. But I am now."

"It's only a room and a kitchen. And we have to share the bath."

"I don't mind if you don't. And if I can afford the rent. I don't know what you're asking."

Maggie told me. I swallowed and did a few mental calculations and said, "I could manage that."

"Have you got any furniture?"

"No. I've been living in a furnished flat with a couple of other girls. But I can get some."

“You sound as though you’re desperate to get out.”

“No, I’m not desperate, but I’d like to be on my own.”

“Well, before you decide you’d better come and see it. Some evening, because John and I both work.”

“*This evening?*” It was impossible to keep my impatience and excitement out of my voice and Maggie laughed.

“All right,” she said. “This evening,” and she picked up the beautifully wrapped parcel of books and prepared to depart.

I suddenly panicked ... “I ... I don’t know the address...”

“Yes you do, silly, it’s on the back of the cheque. Get a twenty-two bus. I’ll expect you about seven.”

“I’ll be there,” I promised.

\* \* \*

Jolting slowly down the Kings Road in the bus I had to consciously damp down my enthusiasm. I was out to buy a pig in a poke. The flat might be totally impossible, too big, too small or inconvenient in some unimagined way. Anything was better than being disappointed. And indeed, from the outside, the little house was entirely unremarkable, one of a row of red brick villas, with fancy pointing around the doors and a depressing tendency towards stained glass. But inside Number 14 was bright with fresh paint and new carpets and Maggie herself in old jeans and a blue sweater.

“Sorry I look such a mess but I’ve got to do all the housework, so I usually change when I get back from the office. Come on, let’s go up and see it ... put your coat on the banisters, John’s not home yet, but I told him you were coming and he thought it was a frightfully good idea...”

Talking all the time, she led the way upstairs and into the empty room which stood at the back of the house. She turned on the light. “It faces south, out over a little park. The people who had the house before us built an extension on underneath, so you’ve got a sort of balcony on its roof.” She opened a glass door and we stepped together out into the cold dark night, and I smelt the leaf-smell of the park, and damp earth, and saw, ringed by lamplight from the streets all around, the stretch of empty darkness. A cold wind blew suddenly, gustily, and the black shape of the plane tree rustled and then the sound was lost in the jet roar of an aeroplane going overhead.

I said, “It’s like being in the country.”

“Well, next best thing perhaps.” She shivered. “Let’s go in before we freeze.” We stepped back through the glass door, and Maggie showed me the tiny kitchen which had been fashioned out of a deep cupboard, and then, halfway down the stairs, the bathroom, which we would all share. Finally, we ended up downstairs again in

Maggie's warm, untidy sitting-room, and she found a bottle of sherry and some potato crisps which she swore were stale, but tasted all right to me. "Do you still want to come?" she asked.

"More than ever."

"When do you want to move in?"

"As soon as possible. Next week if I could."

"What about the girls you're sharing with just now?"

"They'll find someone else. One of them has a sister who's coming to London. I expect she'll move into my room."

"And what about furniture?"

"Oh ... I'll manage."

"I expect," said Maggie comfortably, "your parents will come up trumps, they usually do. When I first came to London, my mother produced the most wonderful treasures out of the attic and the linen cupboard and so..." Her voice died away. I watched her in rueful silence, and she finally laughed at herself. "There I go again, opening my mouth and putting my foot in it. I'm sorry. I've obviously said something idiotically tactless."

"I haven't got a father, and my mother's abroad. She's living in Ibiza. That's really why I want somewhere of my own."

"I am sorry. I should have known, you spending Christmas with the Forbeses ... I mean, I should have guessed."

"There's no reason why you should guess."

"Is your father dead?"

She was obviously curious, but in such an open and friendly way that all at once it seemed ridiculous to close up and shut up the way I usually did when people began asking me questions about my family.

"I don't think so," I said, trying to sound as though it didn't matter. "I think he lives in Los Angeles. He was an actor. My mother eloped with him when she was eighteen. But he soon got bored with domesticity, or perhaps he decided that his career was more important than raising a family. Anyway, the marriage lasted only a few months before he upped and left her, and then my mother had me."

"What a terrible thing to do."

"I suppose it was. I've never thought very much about it. My mother never talked about him. Not because she was particularly bitter or anything, just that when something was over and in the past, she usually forgot it. She's always been like that. She only looks forward, and always with the utmost optimism."

"But what happened after you were born? Did she go back to her parents?"

"No. Never."

“You mean, nobody sent a telegram saying ‘Come back all is forgiven’?”

“I don’t know. I honestly don’t know.”

“There must have been the most resounding row when your mother ran off, but even so...” Her voice trailed away. She was obviously unable to understand a situation which I had accepted with equanimity all my life. “... what sort of people would do a thing like that to their daughter?”

“I don’t know.”

“You must be joking!”

“No. I honestly don’t know.”

“You mean you don’t know your own grandparents?”

“I don’t even know who they are. Or perhaps who they were. I don’t even know if they’re still alive.”

“Don’t you know anything? Didn’t your mother ever say anything?”

“Oh, of course ... little scraps of the past used to come into her conversation but none of it added up to anything. You know how mothers talk to their children, remembering things that happened and things they used to do when they were little.”

“But—Bayliss.” She frowned. “That’s not a very usual name. And it rings a bell somehow but I can’t think why. Haven’t you got a single clue?”

I laughed at her intensity. “You talk as though I really wanted to know. But you see, I don’t. If you’ve never known grandparents, then you don’t miss them.”

“But don’t you wonder...” she groped for words ... “where they *lived*?”

“I know where they lived. They lived in Cornwall. In a stone house with fields that sloped down to the sea. And my mother had a brother called Roger but he was killed during the war.”

“But what did she do after you were born? I suppose she had to go out and get a job.”

“No, she had a little money of her own. A legacy from some old aunt or other. Of course, we never had a car or anything, but we seemed to manage all right. She had a flat in Kensington, in the basement of a house that belonged to some friends. And we stayed there till I was about eight, and then I went to boarding school, and after that we sort of ... moved around...”

“Boarding schools cost money...”

“It wasn’t a very grand boarding school.”

“Did your mother marry again?”

I looked at Maggie. Her expression was lively and avidly curious, but she was kind. I decided that, having gone so far, I may as well tell her the rest.

“She ... wasn’t exactly the marrying type ... But she was always very, very attractive, and I don’t remember a time when there wasn’t some adoring male in

attendance ... And once I was away at school, I suppose there wasn't much reason to go on being circumspect. I never knew where I was going to spend the next set of holidays. Once it was in France, in Provence. Sometimes in this country. Another time it was Christmas in New York."

Maggie took this in, and made a face. "Not much fun for you."

"But educational." I had long ago learned to make a joke of it. "And just think of all the places I've seen, and all the extraordinary places I've lived in. The Ritz in Paris once, and another time a gruesomely cold house in Denbighshire. That was a poet who thought he'd try sheep farming. I've never been so glad in my life when that association came to an end."

"She must be very beautiful."

"No, but men think she is. And she's very gay and improvident and vague, and I suppose you'd say utterly amoral. Maddening. Everything is 'jokey'. It's her big word. Unpaid bills are 'jokey' and lost handbags and unanswered letters, they're all 'jokey'. She has no idea of money and no sense of obligation. An embarrassing sort of person to live with."

"What's she doing in Ibiza?"

"She's living with some Swedish man she met out there. She went out to stay with a couple she knew, and she met this guy and the next thing I knew I had a letter saying that she was going to move in with him. She said he was terribly Nordic and dour but he had a beautiful house."

"How long is it since you've seen her?"

"About two years. I eased out of her life when I was seventeen. I did a secretarial course and took temporary jobs, and finally I ended up working for Stephen Forbes."

"Do you like it?"

"Yes. I do."

"How old are you?"

"Twenty-one."

Maggie smiled again, shaking her long hair in wonderment. "What a lot you've done," she said, and she did not sound in the least bit sorry for me but even slightly envious. "At twenty-one I was a blushing bride in a beastly busty white wedding dress and an old veil that smelt of mothballs. I'm not really a trad. person, but I've got a mother who is, and I'm very fond of her so I usually used to do what she wanted."

I could imagine Maggie's mother. I said, resorting to the comfort of clichés, because I couldn't think of anything else to say, "Oh, well, it takes all sorts," and at that moment we heard John's key in the lock and after that we did not bring up the subject of mothers and families again.

\* \* \*

It was a day like any other day, but it had a bonus attached to it. Last Thursday I had worked late with Stephen, trying to complete the last of the January stocktaking, and in return he had given me this morning off so that I had until lunchtime to my own devices. I filled it in cleaning the flat (which took, at most, no more than half an hour), doing some shopping and taking a bundle of clothes to the launderette. By eleven thirty all this domesticity was completed so I put on my coat and set off, in a leisurely way, for work, intending to walk some of the way, and maybe stand myself an early lunch before getting to the shop.

It was one of those cold, dark, damp days when it never really gets light. I walked, through this gloom, up into the New Kings Road, and headed west. Here, every other shop seems to sell either antiques or second-hand beds or picture frames, and I thought I knew them all, but all at once I found myself outside a shop which I had not noticed before. The outside was painted white, the windows framed in black, and there was a red and white awning pulled out as protection against the imminent drizzle.

I looked up to see what the shop was called and read the name TRISTRAM NOLAN picked out in neat black Roman capitals over the door. This door was flanked by windows filled with delectable odds and ends and I paused to inspect their contents, standing on the pavement bathed in brightness from the many lights which burned within. Most of the furniture was Victorian, re-upholstered and restored and polished. A buttoned sofa with a wide lap and curly legs, a sewing box, a small picture of lap dogs on a velvet cushion.

I looked beyond the windows and into the shop itself, and it was then that I saw the cherrywood chairs. They were a pair, balloon backed, with curved legs and seats embroidered with roses.

I craved them. Just like that. I could picture them in my flat, and I wanted them desperately. For a moment I hesitated. This was no junk shop and the price might well be more than I could afford. But after all, no harm could be done by asking. Before I could lose my nerve, I opened the door and went in.

The shop was empty, but the door opening and closing had rung a bell, and presently there was the sound of someone coming down the stairs, the woollen curtain that hung over the door at the back of the shop was drawn aside and a man came into view.

I suppose I had expected someone elderly and formally attired, in keeping with the ambience of the shop and its contents, but this man's appearance rocked all my vague, preconceived notions. For he was young, tall and long-legged, dressed in jeans—faded to a soft blue and clinging like a second skin—and a blue denim jacket, equally old and faded, with the sleeves turned back in a businesslike way to reveal the checked cuffs of the shirt he wore beneath it. A cotton handkerchief was knotted at his neck and

on his feet he wore soft moccasins, much decorated and fringed.

That winter the most unlikely people were drifting around London dressed as cowboys, but somehow this one looked real, and his worn clothes appeared as genuine as he was. We stood and looked at each other, and then he smiled and for some reason this took me unawares. I don't like being taken unawares, and I said "Good morning" with a certain coolness.

He dropped the curtain behind him and came forward, soft footed. "Can I help you?"

He may have looked like a genuine, dyed-in-the-wool American, but the moment he opened his mouth it was clear that he was no such thing. For some reason this annoyed me. The life I had led with my mother had left me with a thick streak of cynicism about men in general, and phoney's in particular, and this young man, I decided then and there, was a phoney.

"I ... I was going to ask about these little chairs. The balloon-back ones."

"Oh, yes." He came forward to lay his hand on the back of one. The hand was long and shapely, with spade-tipped fingers, the skin very brown. "There's just the pair of them."

I stared at the chairs, trying to ignore his presence.

"I wondered how much they were."

He squatted beside me to search for a price ticket and I saw his hair fell thick and straight to his collar, very dark and lustrous.

"You're in luck," he told me. "They're going very cheap because the leg of one has been broken and then not very professionally repaired." He straightened up suddenly, surprising me by his height. His eyes were slightly tip-tilted, and a very dark brown, with an expression in them that I found disconcerting. He made me uncomfortable and my antipathy for him began to turn to dislike. "Fifteen pounds for the pair," he said. "But if you'd like to wait and pay a little more, I can get the leg reinforced, and perhaps a small veneer put over the joint. That would make it stronger and it would look better too."

"Isn't it all right now?"

"It would be all right for you," said the young man, "... but if you had a large fat man for dinner, he'd probably end up on his backside."

There was a pause while I regarded him—I hoped coldly. His eyes were brimming, with a malicious amusement which I had no intention of sharing. I did not appreciate the suggestion that the only men who would ever come and have dinner with me would necessarily be large and fat.

I said at last, "How much would it cost me to have the leg repaired?"

"Say five pounds. That means you get the chairs for a tenner each."

I worked this out, and decided that I could just afford them.

“I’ll take them.”

“Good,” said the young man and put his fists on his hips and smiled amiably, as though this were the end of the transaction.

I decided he was utterly inefficient. “Do you want me to pay for them now, or to leave a deposit...?”

“No, that doesn’t matter. You can pay for them when you collect them.”

“Well, when will they be ready?”

“In about a week.”

“Don’t you want my name?”

“Not unless you want to give it to me.”

“What happens if I never come back?”

“Then I expect they’ll be sold to someone else.”

“I don’t want to lose them.”

“You won’t,” said the young man.

I frowned, angry with him, but he only smiled and went to the door to open it for me. Cold air poured in, and outside the drizzle had started and the street looked dark as night.

He said, “Goodbye,” and I managed a frosty smile of thanks and went past him, out into the gloom, and as I did so I heard the bell ring as he shut the door behind me.

The day was, all at once, unspeakable. My pleasure in buying the chairs had been wrecked by the irritation which the young man had generated. I did not usually take instant dislikes to people and I was annoyed not only with him, but with myself, for being so vulnerable. I was still brooding on this when I walked down Walton Street and let myself into Stephen Forbes’s bookshop. Even the comfort of being indoors and the pleasant smell of new paper and printers’ ink did nothing to dispel my wretched mood.

The shop was on three levels, with new books on the ground floor, second-hand books and old prints upstairs, and Stephen’s office in the basement. I saw that Jennifer, the second girl, was busy with a customer, and the only other person visible was an old lady in a tweed cape engrossed in the Gardening section, so I headed for the little cloakroom, unbuttoning my coat as I went, but then I heard Stephen’s heavy, unmistakable footsteps coming up from downstairs, and for some reason I stopped to wait for him. The next moment he appeared, tall, stooping and spectacled, with his usual expression of vague benevolence. He wore dark suits that always managed to appear as though in need of a good press, and already, at this early hour, the knot of his tie had begun to slip down, revealing the top button of his shirt.

“Rebecca,” he said.

“Yes, I’m here...”

“I’m glad I’ve caught you.” He came to my side speaking low-voiced, so as not to disturb the customers. “There’s a letter for you downstairs; it’s been forwarded on from your old flat. You’d better nip down and collect it.”

I frowned. “A letter?”

“Yes. Airmail. Lots of foreign stamps. It has, for some reason, an air of urgency about it.”

My irritation, along with all thoughts of new chairs, was lost in a sudden apprehension.

“Is it from my mother?”

“I don’t know. Why don’t you go and find out?”

So I went down the steep, uncarpeted stairs to the basement, lit, on this dark day, by long strip-lights let into the ceiling. The office was marvellously untidy—as usual—littered with letters and parcels and files, piles of old books, and cardboard boxes and ashtrays which nobody ever remembered to empty. But the letter was on the middle of Stephen’s blotter and instantly visible.

I picked it up. An airmail envelope, Spanish stamps, an Ibizan postmark. But the writing was unfamiliar, pointed and spiky, as though a very fine pen had been used. It had been sent to the old flat, but this address had been crossed out and the address of the bookshop substituted in large, girlish, handwriting. I wondered how long the letter had lain on the table by the front door, before one of the girls realized that it was there and had taken the trouble to forward it on to me.

I sat down in Stephen’s chair and slit the envelope. Inside, two pages of fine airmail paper, and the date at the head was the third of January. Very nearly a month ago. My mind sounded a note of alarm and, suddenly frightened, I began to read.

Dear Rebecca,

I hope you do not mind me calling you by your Christian name, but your mother has spoken to me of you a great deal. I am writing because your mother is very ill. She has been unwell for some time and I wished to write to you before but she would not let me.

Now, however, I am taking matters into my own hands, and with the doctor’s approval I am letting you know that I think you should come out to see her.

If you can do this, perhaps you will cable me the number of your aeroplane flight so that I can be at the airport to meet you.

I know that you are working and it may not be easy to make this trip, but I would advise you to waste no time. I am afraid that you will find your mother very changed, but her spirit is still high.

With good wishes.

Sincerely,

Otto Pedersen.

I sat in unbelief, and stared at the letter. The formal words told me nothing and everything. My mother was very ill, perhaps dying. A month ago I had been asked to

waste no time but to go to her. Now it was a month later, and I had only just got the letter and perhaps she was already dead—and I had never gone. What would he think of me, this Otto Pedersen whom I had never seen, whose name, even, I had not known until this moment?

## 2

I read the letter again, and then again, the flimsy pages rustling in my hands. I was still there, sitting at his desk, when Stephen finally came downstairs to find me.

I turned to look up at him over my shoulder. He saw my face and said, “What is it?”

I tried to tell him, but could not. Instead I thrust the letter at him, and while he took it, and read it, I sat with my elbows on his desk, biting my thumbnails, bitter and angry, and fighting a terrible anxiety.

He was soon finished reading. He tossed the letter down on the desk between us, and said, “Did you know she was ill?”

I shook my head.

“When did you last hear from her?”

“Four, five months ago. She never wrote letters.” I looked up at him and said, furiously, choked by the great lump in my throat, “That was nearly a *month* ago. That letter’s been lying in the flat, and nobody bothered to send it to me. She may be dead by now and I never went, and she’ll think I simply didn’t care!”

“If she had died,” said Stephen, “then we’d have surely heard. Now, don’t cry, there isn’t time for that. What we have to do is get you out to Ibiza with all convenient speed, and let—” he glanced down at the letter again—“Mr Pedersen know you’re arriving. Nothing else matters.”

I said, “I can’t go,” and my mouth began to grow square and my lower lip tremble as though I were a ten-year-old.

“Why can’t you go?”

“Because I haven’t got enough money for the fare.”

“Oh, my dear child, let me worry about that...”

“But I can’t let you...”

“Yes, you can, and if you get all stiff-necked about it then you can pay me back over the next five years and I’ll charge you interest, if it’ll make you feel happier, and now for God’s sake don’t let’s mention it again...” He was already reaching for the directory, behaving in an altogether efficient and un-Stephen-like fashion. “Have you got a passport? And nobody’s going to clamp down on you for smallpox injections or anything tiresome like that. Hallo? British Airways? I want to make a reservation on the first plane to Ibiza.” He smiled down at me, still fighting tears and temper, but

already feeling a little better. There is nothing like having a large and kindly man to take over in times of emotional stress. He picked up a pencil and drew a sheet of paper towards him and began to make notes. “Yes. When? Fine. Can we have a reservation, please? Miss Rebecca Bayliss. And what time does it get to Ibiza? And the flight number? Thank you so much. Thank you. Yes, I’ll get her to the airport myself.”

He put down the receiver and surveyed, with some satisfaction, the illegible squiggles his pencil had made.

“That’s it, then. You fly tomorrow morning, change planes at Palma, get to Ibiza about half-past-seven. I’ll drive you to the airport. No, don’t start arguing again, I wouldn’t feel happy unless I saw you actually walk on to the aeroplane. And now we’ll cable Mr Otto Pedersen—” he picked up the letter again—“at the Villa Margareta, Santa Catarina, and let him know that you’re coming.” He smiled down at me with such cheerful reassurance that I was suddenly filled with hope.

I said, “I can’t ever thank you...”

“I don’t ever want you to,” said Stephen. “It’s the least I can do.”

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I flew the next day, in a plane half-filled with hopeful winter holiday tourists. They even carried straw hats against an improbably blazing sun, and their faces, as we stepped out into a steady drizzle at Palma, were disappointed but resolutely cheerful, as though, for certain, tomorrow would be better.

The rain never ceased, all the four hours I waited in the transit lounge, and the flight out of Palma was bumpy with thick, wet clouds. But as we rose above them and headed out across the sea, the weather brightened. The clouds thinned and broke, disclosing an evening sky of robin’s egg blue, and far below the crumpled sea was streaked with the pink light of the setting sun.

It was dark when we landed. Dark and damp. Coming down the gangway beneath a sky full of bright southern stars, there was only the smell of petrol, but as I walked across the puddled tarmac towards the lights of the terminal building I felt the soft wind in my face. It was warm and smelt of pines, and was evocative of every summer holiday I had ever spent abroad.

At this quiet time of the year the plane had not been full. It did not take long to get through Customs and Immigration, and—my passport stamped—I picked up my suitcase and walked into the Arrivals Lounge.

There were the usual small groups of waiting people standing about or sitting hunched apathetically on the long plastic banquettes. I stopped and looked about me, waiting to be identified, but could see nobody who looked in the least like a Swedish writer come to meet me. And then a man turned from buying a newspaper at the

bookstall. Across the room our eyes met, and he folded the newspaper and began to walk towards me, pushing his paper into his jacket pocket as though it were no longer of any use to him. He was tall and thin, with hair that was either blond or white—it was impossible to tell in the bright, impersonal electric light. Before he was half way across the polished floor I smiled tentatively, and as he approached he said my name, “Rebecca?” with a question mark at the end of it, still not entirely certain that it was I.

“Yes.”

“I’m Otto Pedersen.” We shook hands and he gave a formal little bow as he did so. His hair, I saw then, was pale blond, turning grey, and his face was deeply tanned, thin and bony, the skin dry and finely wrinkled from long exposure to the sun. His eyes were very pale, and more grey than blue. He wore a black polo-necked sweater and a light oatmeal-coloured suit with pleated pockets, like a safari shirt, and a belt which hung loose, the buckle swinging. He smelt of aftershave and looked as clean as if he had been bleached.

Having found each other, it was suddenly difficult to find anything to say. All at once we were both overwhelmed by the circumstances of our meeting and I realized that he was as unsure of himself as I. But he was also urbane and polite, and dealt with this by taking my suitcase from me and asking if this was all my luggage.

“Yes, that’s all.”

“Then let us go to the car. If you like to wait at the door, I will fetch it and save you the walk...”

“I’ll come with you.”

“It’s only across the road, in the car park.”

So we went out together, into the darkness again. He led me to the half empty car park. Here, he stopped by a big black Mercedes, unlocked it, and tossed my case on to the back seat. Then he held the door open so that I could get in before coming around to the front of the car to settle himself beside me.

“I hope you had a good journey,” he said, politely, as we left the terminal behind us and headed out into the road.

“It was a little bumpy in Palma. I had to wait four hours.”

“Yes. There are no direct flights at this time of the year.”

I swallowed. “I must explain about not answering your letter. I’ve moved flats, and I didn’t get it till yesterday morning. It wasn’t forwarded to me, you see. It was so good of you to write, and you must have wondered why I never replied.”

“I thought something like that must have happened.”

His English was perfect, only the precise Swedish vowel sounds betraying his origins, and a certain formality in the manner in which he expressed himself.

“When I got your letter I was so frightened ... that it would be too late.”

“No,” said Otto. “It is not too late.”

Something in his voice made me look at him. His profile was knife sharp against the yellow glow of passing street lights, his expression unsmiling and grave.

I said, “Is she dying?”

“Yes,” said Otto. “Yes, she is dying.”

“What is wrong with her?”

“Cancer of the blood. You call it leukaemia.”

“How long has she been ill?”

“About a year. But it was only just before Christmas time that she became so ill. The doctor thought that we should try blood transfusions, and I took her to the hospital for this. But it was no good, because as soon as I got her home again, she started this very bad nose bleed, and so the ambulance had to come and take her back to hospital again. She was there over Christmas and only then allowed home again. It was after that I wrote to you.”

“I wish I’d got the letter in time. Does she know I’m coming?”

“No, I didn’t tell her. You well know how she loves surprises, and equally how she hates to be disappointed. I thought there was a chance that something would go wrong and you wouldn’t be on the plane.” He smiled frostily, “But of course you were.”

We stopped at a cross-roads to wait for a country cart to pass in front of us, the feet of the mule making a pleasant sound on the dusty road, and a lantern swinging from the back of the cart. Otto took advantage of the pause to take a cheroot from the breast pocket of his jacket and light it from the lighter on the dashboard. The cart passed, we moved on.

“How long is it since you have seen your mother?”

“Two years.”

“You must expect a great change. I am afraid you will be shocked, but you must try not to let her see. She is still very vain.”

“You know her so well.”

“But of course.”

I longed to ask him if he loved her. The question was on the tip of my tongue, but I realized that at this stage of our acquaintance it would be nothing but impertinence to ask such an intimate and personal thing. Besides, what difference did it make? He had met her and wanted to be with her, had given her a home, and now, when she was so ill, was cherishing her in his own apparently unemotional manner. If that wasn’t love, then what was?

After a little, we began to talk of other things. I asked him how long he had lived on the island, and he said five years. He had come first in a yacht and had liked the place so well that he had returned the next year to buy his house and settle here.