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The Birds and the Bees

Milly Johnson

Chapter 1

Making a cake for Danny's school raffle was always going to be a messy business, given Stevie's predilection for taste-testing the gloopy, raw mixture at one-minute intervals. Not to mention her impatience in waiting for the blades to stop whisking before she lifted them up, which resulted in her splattering herself and the kitchen with chocolate cream. Then, as usual, the bag of flour split and sent up a white nuclear cloud to descend over all flat surfaces. She really must get a proper flour container, she said to herself for the six-hundredth time, knowing, deep down, that she never would.

With the cake rising nicely in the oven, she was just in the process of licking out the bowl and the big spoon when the doorbell rang. However, there was no need to panic and rush to clean herself up, Stevie decided, as it could only be her friend Catherine bringing Danny home after a post-school romp with her mob and the family mongrels. So she answered the door garnished with flour and enough cocoa on her face to pass an audition for the part of main slapstick stooge in a Christmas Panto.

The trouble was that it wasn't Catherine. It was, in fact, a big rough-looking man, approximately the size of Edinburgh Castle, with a long auburn ponytail, a wild red beard, a tribal-looking scar on his left cheek and Bluto-esque tattooed arms which he used to push gently past Stevie in order to barge straight into her front room like the proverbial bull looking for her best crockery.

'Whurrrissseee?' came a broad Scottish burr that belonged on someone with their face painted half-blue and half-white, wearing a battle kilt and swinging an axe.

'Excuse me, do you mind!' said Stevie, torn between calling the police and reaching for some wet wipes. Tough decision but the wet wipes won on embarrassment points.

'Whurrr's Finch?'

'Who the hell are you?'

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'Adam MacLean, Joanna MacLean's man.'

So this was the mythical creature Stevie had heard so much about then. This loud, hard intruder standing on her sheepskin rug was him. She gave his big muscular frame a quick once-over. And there she was, thinking Jo had been exaggerating when describing the control-freak nutter she was married to. No wonder Matthew was so sympathetic to her at work. Well, Stevie wasn't going to be scared of him too and cower in a corner of her own home waiting for him to stick his whisky-fuelled boot in, like Jo did.

In the same second, Adam MacLean had affirmed that this woman was, in fact, the greedy, lazy, rarely sober, slob thing that Jo had reported her to be. That's why the kitchen behind her resembled Beirut on a bad day and why she herself looked as if she had been hit at close range by a chocolate bomb. On a binge, most likely. That's what these women who sat at home did all dayÊ- eat cakes, drink sherry and watch Trisha. And read all those stupid Midnight Moon crappy romance books that seemed to be littered around the room, he noted. No wonder Jo had been so sympathetic to the poor bloke at work, about to be married to that.

Stevie pulled herself up to her full height of five foot two.

'Matthew is on business in Aberdeen.'

'I think you'll find he's no',' said Adam grimly. 'He's in bloody Magalluf with ma Jo!'

'Don't be ridiculous!' said Stevie. Crikey, Matthew had said that the Scot was a possessive, unhinged psycho with the part of his head empty that should have had a brain in it, but she hadn't realized to what degree. Poor Jo.

'I thought you might say that,' said Adam, reaching in his back pocket to bring out a crumpled piece of paper, which he stuck under Stevie's nose. She pulled back, reclaiming some of her personal space, unfolded it impatiently and looked straight at a confirmation letter of bookings, hotel, flight numbers, today's date and names: Sunshine Holidays, Hotel Flora, Magalluf, Mr Matthew Finch and Ms Joanna MacLean, 25 April for 7 days. It had their address in the top corner: 15 Blossom Lane, Dodmoor. She would have slumped to the chair had the doorbell not rung again.

'Excuse me, it's my son,' said Stevie in a half-daze. She opened the door to find her best friend there, holding the hand of her small bespectacled boy. The half-daze expanded into a full daze as she noticed that Catherine's normally auburn hair was now bright pink, like candyfloss. The only things that were missing were the stick, the plastic bag and a fair in the background.

I'm going mad, thought Stevie, blinking twice, but no - the hair was still pink.

Adam, seeing the guest there on the doorstep, was unsurprised. He noticed the cheap trollop hair. That she had friends who went out looking like that further confirmed his low opinion of the woman in whose house he was standing. And the

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boy was too old to be Finch's if they had only been together a couple of years. Boy, she sure got around, didn't she?

'Hi, what a day, I've brought Dan -- ' Catherine looked at her friend's pale and chocolate-splodged face then spotted the man beyond her. 'Are you all right?'

'No, not really,' said Stevie. 'Just gotÊ...something...to do.'

Catherine did a quick assessment of the situation and bobbed down to the little fair-haired boy.

'Danny, let's go for a bun and some orange juice to the cafe round the corner for half an hour. Mummy's just sorting something out.'

'Cool!' said Danny with a face-splitting grin. That was the cherry on the perfect-day cake for him.

Catherine then turned to Stevie. 'Go on, it's fine. I'll see you in a bit.'

'Thanks, Cath,' said Stevie, gulping back a big ball of emotion that she couldn't quite put a name to.

As Stevie came slowly back into the room, Adam said with a subdued cough, 'I'm sorry, I never thought about your wee wan being here.'

Stevie answered him with a glare loaded with loathing as she dropped to the sofa. Adam continued to tower over her like the Cairngorms as he continued, 'I found that note this morning when she'd gone. To a health farm in Wales, so she said. That explained the bikini but didnae explain why she'd taken her passporrrt.'

It was all too big to take in. Stevie hoped it was her brain playing tricks on her - early menopause or something - or that the raw eggs in the cake-mix had caused a rogue hallucination. Something which had become more of a possibility when she saw the state of Catherine's hair.

One part of her head was telling her that Matthew wouldn't ever do anything like that. He'd known how hurt she was by what had happened to her in the past and had sworn that he would never put her through pain like that. Matthew was thoughtful and considerate. Matthew was the sort of man who befriended his work colleague, Jo MacLean, a woman desperately trying to muster the courage to leave her brute of a husband because he made her so unhappy - and you couldn't fake those sorts of tears! She and Jo had been shopping together. She had even cooked Jo tea. And bought her a birthday present. Matthew wouldn't have brought her home if there had been anything going on - NO! There was no question but that she trusted both of them implicitly. Jo had become a friend in her own right now. Jo was sweet and uncomplicated, and she was lovely to Danny. She had even been allowed to see the dress that was hanging up in the spare room. She and Jo had talked for hours and Jo would be a wedding guest when Stevie put it on and married Matthew in exactly thirty-nine days' time.

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However, the other part of her brain governed the eyes, and those were reading over and over again the brutal evidence on the paper that she was still holding limply in her trembling hands.

'You could have made this up yourself on a computer!' Stevie blurted out.

'Aye,' said Adam MacLean, clicking his fingers in an 'I am undone' way. 'Do you know, I have so much spare time I often do things like this. I really must stop it, it's becoming a dreadful habit.'

Okay, so she believed it wasn't a fake. Then again, she knew Jo and she knew Matthew and she didn't know this blaze-haired thug. Then again, Matthew had bought three pairs of shorts last week. For the honeymoon, he'd said. Then again, this was Matthew! Her head felt like a John McEnroe, Bjorn Borg Wimbledon final, batting arguments back and forth over a net of reason. Advantage, deuce, advantage, deuce...

A light bulb went on in Stevie's head.

'I'll ring him!'

'You think he's going tae answer, do ya?' said the big Scot with a mocking laugh. Ignoring him, Stevie picked up the house phone and rang the short-dial for Matthew's number. She waited, heard the dialling tone, and a second later a muffled version of the song, 'Goodbye-ee' started playing nearby. Stevie put the phone down, opened a drawer and retrieved the mobile tinkling out its mocking ringtone.

'Cocky bstarrr',' said Adam with a low but nasty growl.

'It's from Oh What a Lovely War,' explained Stevie. 'It's his favourite musical.'

Those details didn't help either of them. In fact, they made Adam want to not only smack Finch in the teeth but knock them all out as well and replant them in his skull.

'Well anyway,' Adam said, the fire of his fury now dropping to still hot but more quietly burning embers, 'I thought you had the right tae know.'

'Thanks for telling me,' said Stevie numbly, which sounded a bit odd - but what did one say in these circumstances? What was the correct protocol after being informed that one's fianc□e was knocking off someone else's wife in the middle of Majorca? Especially when still in a state of denial, despite all the hard evidence. Bravely, her mind was still manically sifting through the information available, looking for the loophole that would enable her to say, 'Ah ha, you've got it all wrong,' because it was there, she was sure of it. Matthew wouldn't, he just wouldn't do this. She knew him inside out. She knew that he wouldn't, couldn't be that cruel.

Adam stroked his red beard like a small facial pet. 'Right, I'll go then.'

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'Yes, I think you should rather,' said Stevie, and almost blindly showed him out without further comment. Then she shut the door hard on him and stood behind it, fighting the urge to slither down it and become an emotional mess on the floor.

She went to the dresser where they kept their passports, hardly daring to open it in case Matthew's wasn't there. Of course it's there, don't be stupid, Stevie, she reprimanded herself, and opened the drawer with one swift, sure movementÊ- but she couldn't find it. Yet it was always there with her own, the pages of his around hers, as if they were spooning. Maybe he moved it. Maybe he threw it away because it was out of date. Maybe he needed to take it with him as a form of ID. Her head tried its best to rationalize the passport's absence, but it couldn't compete with the mighty guns of the information on the booking form.

And then smoke started billowing out of the kitchen and set off the alarm, and it felt like all hell had been let loose in her head.

Danny came home to find all the downstairs windows open in the hope of clearing the acrid smell of burnt baking, and his mum covered in even more flour, frenetically stirring up an anaemic and lumpy mixture in a bowl. Stevie forced herself into jolly mode as he ran in to greet her. She grabbed him and picked him up and kissed him and asked him all the right questions: Did he have a nice time? Did he mind his manners? Did he throw the ball for Chico and Boot, like he was going to? Catherine noticed how desperately she seemed to bury her head into his hair and how tightly she cuddled him.

'Is that my cake?' asked the little boy with a much-wrinkled nose as he looked over his mum's shoulder at the still-smoking charcoal lumps in the cake-tin.

'No, of course not,' said Stevie, sniffing back the tears that his baby smell had brought rushing up her ducts. 'I'm making yours now; it's going to be very special.'

'Go upstairs, love, and get your pyjamas on,' said Catherine, sending him away with a light pat on his bottom. Then, when she was sure he was out of earshot, she said, 'So who the hell was that?'

'Adam MacLean.'

'Ada...As in that Jo's husband? What did he want?'

'I'll never get this cake done. I've only got one egg left.'

'Sod the cake, Stevie,' said Catherine to her friend, who looked as grey as the horrible stuff in the bowl. 'Look, go and put the kettle on and I'll tuck Danny up and read him a quick story. Then we'll talk.'

'I haven't said good night to him.'

'One night won't kill either of you. He's bushed, anyway. He's been bouncing about since he came back from school and I bet he won't even notice. I'll be back in ten

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minutes max,' and with that Catherine rushed upstairs, leaving Stevie feeling far more of a helpless child than her four year old currently slipping into his 'Incredibles' pyjamas and about to clean his teeth with Strawberry Sparkle toothpaste.

She had not brewed the tea by the time Catherine returned. She was still stirring the limp liquid in the bowl, her head scrabbling for a solution to the cake problem because she couldn't let Danny down. She had promised him a wonderful cake to take into class and she always kept her promises. Double always for her son.

'I promise I'd never do anything to hurt you,' Matthew had said. It was just a shame other people weren't as conscientious, it seemed.

'Is he okay?' asked Stevie.

'Course he is. Out like a light.'

'What happened to your hair?' said Stevie. The sight of it was claiming a huge percentage of her attention.

'Marilyn Monroe bleaching kit from abroad, don't ask. And don't ever let our Kate use you to test out her eBay buys. Bloody student beauticians! Anyway, never mind about me, what's been going on? What did Billy Connolly want?'

'Oh, just to tell me that Jo has run off with Matthew to Magalluf.' She said it so matter-of-factly that Catherine presumed she was joking and laughed.

'Oh, right. Stupid lout! Did you say you'd ring the police? What is he on? Run off with Jo, ha. As if Matt...'

Her words dried up as Stevie handed her the booking confirmation and her mouth moved like a goldfish that was wondering where all the water in his bowl had gone. She read it three times and each time it seemed more ridiculous than the last.

'No! He wouldn't...he couldn't do that to you! Not Matthew. Where is he? Have you rung him?'

'He left his mobile at home.'

'Did you check it for text messages?'

'It's wiped clean. And there's no number for Jo in his phone book.'

'Well, have you looked for his passport?'

'It's gone,' said Stevie, crumbling a little more. It was starting to sink in that this might actually be happening to her. That Redbeard might be right.

Catherine looked at the paper again. 'Is it genuine?'

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'Why would he make it up?'

'Because...er...' Catherine tried to think of something constructive to say, but all that came out was another flurry of denials. 'No way would Matthew do this to you! Not him. Not Matt!'

'It looks as if he has, Cath,' said Stevie in the sort of voice that Catherine's youngest used when she was trying very desperately to be brave. She continued to stir until Catherine forcibly extracted the bowl from her, gently, because it looked as if Stevie badly needed something to hold onto, and gripping the spoon seemed to be the only thing keeping her from falling over.

'This isn't going to make a cake, ever,' she said. 'Not even a starving Oliver Twist would want a second helping of this. Come on, leave it. I'll get our Kate to knock one up tonight and I'll bring it over in the morning. It's the least she can do after this,' and she pointed upwards at her pink cloud of hair. Stevie gave none of her usual protests and just said a weary, 'Thank you.' Then Catherine tipped the mix down the sink. She was impressed. Stevie had actually managed to make it thinner than water.

'Danny wanted to start calling Matt Daddy,' said Stevie. 'It was a good job I told him to wait until after the wedding.'

'Look, Stevie, you need to talk to Matthew and find out what is going on. Will he ring you, to say he's arrived in wherever he's supposed to be - Inverness?'

'Aberdeen. Maybe. He hasn't been away before for any length of time so I don't know what the usual sequence of events would be,' Stevie shrugged. She didn't know if he would ring or not. She didn't know anything any more.

'Of course he'll ring,' said Catherine heartily. Every man was innocent until proven guilty. Except Mick, who should have been hung, drawn and quartered and his knackers cut off before he'd even got to trial. Although she shouldn't think ill of the dead.

'What if it's true? What do I do?' said Stevie, trying to keep the panic out of her voice. She'd panicked last time and it had made her lose her grip, sent her into such a downward spiral of emotional quicksand that she thought she was destined to drown in it. Until Matthew held out his hand and offered her the lifeline of his love.

And what about Danny? This was the only dad he'd ever known. He would lose two men in his life who had gone for the title and then bogged off before the crown was on their heads. What sort of damage would that do to his little heart? She was going through partners faster than Henry VIII, and look how his kids turned out. At that thought, Stevie caved into the huge pressure of tears and Catherine, her future chief bridesmaid, came over to give her a big hug, because that was easier than trying to work out what the hell to say to give any comfort.

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'I don't know what you'll do, love. Let's cross that bridge when we come to it, eh? Look, pass me the phone. I'll ring Eddie and tell him I'm staying with you tonight.'

'No, I'm okay,' said Stevie, pulling away and wiping madly at her eyes. 'I need to think straight, and I can do that better on my own. I'll just cry if you're here and I really don't want to do that. I'll be fine. You goÊ- you've got three hundred kids and a zoo to sort out.'

'Cheeky!' said Catherine, smiling softly.

'Lucky you, though,' said Stevie.

'I can't leave you,' said Catherine. 'Come home with me. You and Danny.'

'Honestly, I'd rather be alone.'

'Well, look,' said Catherine, when she was fully convinced that Stevie really did want that and wasn't being her usual overly independent self, 'I'll go and sort out this cake for Danny and I'll be round first thing in the morning.' She pre-empted the little protest that she saw coming, 'And no, it isn't a problem, before you start. My daughter owes me big time.'

After extracting another fifty affirmations that Stevie would ring her immediately if she felt out of her depth and wanted to change her mind about coming over, Catherine went on her way back to her huge brood to tackle an urgent hair repair and an emergency baking project. Making a cake for her godson was the least she could do after breaking the vow she had made to herself: never to let another dickhead break his mother's heart.

The phone rang about ten minutes after Catherine had gone; it showed 'number withheld' on the caller display unit. Knowing instinctively who it would be, Stevie's hand came out to pick it up. Then, realizing she couldn't trust herself to act 'normal', she overrode the compulsion to speak to him, collapse into uncontrolled tears and beg him to come home. Instead, she let the answerphone handle it. It was, as she knew it would be, Matthew, her gorgeous tall fianc□ with the dark brown hair and the dark brown eyes and the smile that made her heart melt like ice cream on a hotplate.

'Hi, Stevie, it's Matthew. You...er...must be in bed. Anyway, just a quick call to let you know that I've arrived safely - motorway's a nightmare! Looks very busy, lots of people. All set for a good hard week so I don't know when I'll have the chance to speak to you again. Forgot my mobile didn't I, ha ha! Anyway, take care and hope everything's okay. Er...bye then.'

No I love you, no Hope Danny's okay, no Miss you. His voice sounded a lot further away than Aberdeen. And she was probably imagining it, but every one of the three million times she played that message back, she was sure she could hear the strains of 'Guantanamera' in the background.

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