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Singing Bird

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Extract

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Chapter 1

We were drinking champagne in the kitchen when the nun telephoned. I rerun the moment. What if I hadn't decided to have a party? What if we'd simply locked up and gone elsewhere for a drink? Or if the house move had been a week earlier? Would my life have continued in the safe, familiar pattern?

Maybe. But she was a determined woman. She would have tracked down the new address and telephone number. We were only moving to the other side of the Thames. We are in the telephone book.

Or she would have left a message. And I would have replied. Because my latent curiosity only wanted an excuse. I would have taken the same path into the past eventually. She is not to blame.

I go back in my mind to the day of the call. It was our second last day in the old house. I got up early and made a lamb casserole. At eight o'clock I brought Jack a cup of coffee and drew back the curtains in the bedroom.

'The wind blew the runner beans down. They look all ragged and forlorn.'

'Summer always ends with a storm,' he said. 'We're halfway through September, Lena.'

He bent his blond head over the cup and inhaled, before drinking.

'You spoil me,' he said.

'I like spoiling you.'

'Do you mind me going away?'

A blackbird flew up from the wreckage of the beans and settled on the garden wall.

I turned and smiled at him. 'Everything's under control.'

I had plotted the move on a spreadsheet, and pinned it up in the hall. After Jack left for the office, Alma and two of my neighbours arrived to help me pack up. We moved methodically from room to room, sorting, packing, and tying colour-coded labels to furniture and boxes.

Just before five o'clock, I tied a pink label to a box of cookery books. I took a bottle of champagne from the fridge and called out, 'That's the last one. Time to celebrate!'

It was Alma's birthday. I had made her a cake. It sat on

the breakfast bar dividing the living space from the kitchen. A Victoria sponge. Cream and home-made raspberry jam in the middle. Soft white icing on top. Pink miniature candles matched the labels dotted around the room.

'How about some music,' Alma said. 'Some opera? Our favourite singer, perhaps?'

Rosemary and Janet clapped. I bowed to acknowledge the tribute to my daughter as I slipped *Mary Molloy Sings Mozart and Rossini* into the CD player. It was her first recording, and is still my favourite.

Mary's voice filled the empty space and floated up to the attics.

'Tell me fair ladies, what ails my heart?

Yonder cupid, is this his dart?'

Her entire personality is contained in that sparkling combination of music and words. Delight and wonder, perfectly conveyed. We had rolled up the rugs, leaving parquet and bare boards. There was nothing to deaden the sound.

'*Yonder Cupid, is this his dart?*' Mary reprised.

'It's like being inside a giant speaker,' Alma said.

We sat at the long oak table drinking champagne, drunk on the music. The sky cleared. Sunshine splashed into the room. Mary began the Cavatina from *The Barber of Seville*. I bathed in the afterglow of a job well done.

'*Una voce poco fa,*

Qu'nel cor m'risuonò,'

I looked at the bright sky and thought of Mary on her way from Stuttgart to Heathrow. In the innocent minutes before the telephone rang, I sat in the September sunlight in a house I loved, listening to my daughter singing, in the company of friends, utterly content.

'*Sono obbediente, dolce, amorosa;*'

Alma said, 'Is that the telephone?'

'*. . . mi fo guidar.*'

'Mary?' said Janet.

'She should be in the air by now. Unless her plane is late.'

Alma held open the glass door into the hall, waving me through with a flourish of her right hand. I waltzed past her, made a mock curtsy, and lifted the phone off the hook, still slightly unbalanced.

'Mrs Molloy? Mrs Lena Molloy?'

It wasn't Mary. I steadied myself against the banisters and signalled to Alma to turn down the music.

'Yes. This is Lena Molloy.'

'Sister Monica Devine speaking. Do you remember me? Saint Joseph's Home?'

I sank on to the staircase. My heart was thumping.

Sister Monica. The nun who gave me Mary.

Alma quietly closed the kitchen door. I mouthed amazement at her.

'Mrs Molloy? Are you still there?'

'Yes. You've just taken me by surprise, sister.' That was an

understatement. Thoughts and memories chased each other round my brain. 'What can I do for you? Is there a problem?'

'No. No. Not at all. It's just . . .' she paused, 'well, I'll be retiring soon. I was reorganising my office, tidying a few loose ends, and I just thought it would be nice to catch up on all my babies.' Catch up? It was twenty-seven years since we'd last spoken.

'You're lucky you found me. We're moving house.'

'Well, now isn't that great. Tell me now . . .' the brogue accentuated by the telephone, 'what name did you give her?'

'Mary,' I said, glancing towards the kitchen. Janet was lighting the candles on the cake. 'I'm sorry, sister. I'm a bit busy just now. Can I call you back? I'm in the middle of getting things organised. But I could call you back.'

I tucked the telephone under my chin and reached for the message pad on the table. My hand shook as I wrote down the number. I fumbled at the handle of the kitchen door.

Alma said, 'What's wrong?'

'It's the nun who gave me Mary,' I said. 'Sister Monica. She ran the home where Mary was born.'

'Is everything all right?'

'She said there wasn't a problem. It was just a catch-up call. But I'm going to call her back.'

Janet topped up my glass and Rosemary handed it to me. Their eyes were like saucers.

'Blow them out before they go out on their own,' I said to Alma.

She drew up her shoulders, and with one gust of breath blew out all the candles. Rosemary, Janet and I raised our glasses and chorused, 'Happy birthday, Alma.'

'When were you last in Ireland, Lena?' said Alma. 'You haven't been for a while, have you?'

'Ireland?' said Janet.

'Was the nun ringing from Ireland?' said Rosemary.

They knew Mary was adopted. It wasn't something we talked about much. When Jack and I moved to Stratton Road, and Mary began playing with Janet's children and we got to know each other, I told Janet. As my circle widened and took in Janet's friends, they all came to know too. It was simply another fact that got passed around and absorbed by our small circle. Like Janet's mother being Canadian, Harry's ex-wife being an actress, and Rosemary's husband, Phil, dancing too close to his wife's friends at parties.

Alma, of course, had known about Mary from the beginning of our friendship. I had told her about meeting Jack, falling in love, getting married, and trying for a baby. Trying and failing. She'd heard all this a long time ago. She knew we'd adopted Mary in Ireland.

'We haven't been over for ages,' I said. 'Not since Mary was small. When we realised how musical she was, we started going to summer schools and festivals in the holidays.'

'You adopted Mary in Ireland?' said Rosemary.

'Yes,' I said. 'And it was all quite sudden and miraculous.'

Looking back, it still seemed like a miracle. Something meant. Jack's food-importing business was beginning to show a decent profit. For the first time since we'd got married we had plenty of money. Jack still spent weeks away from home looking for new suppliers, but he'd hired more staff. I didn't need to spend as much time in the office. It was the perfect time to have a baby. But it didn't happen. There was no hi-tech fertility treatment in those days. We tried not to think about it. It was just a shared sadness in our lives.

'Jack had a cousin who was getting married to a girl from County Offaly,' I told them. 'We flew over to Ireland for the wedding. But we went early and took a holiday at the same time. Our feet hardly touched the ground. We flew to Shannon and drove up the coast to County Mayo to stay with a cousin of Jack's father. Ned O'Connor. A charming man. He died about ten years ago. He was taller even than Jack. He carried a hawthorn stick. He knew every bend in the road. We had a wonderful time. One day he drove us along a flat peninsula in Mayo. About as far west as you can go. We were right on the edge of the Atlantic. Next stop Newfoundland. There wasn't another car in sight. We took a side road and it ran out at the shoreline. There were the ruins of a church, and this shrine in a field. A faded plaster

statue and a well with a hedge round it, on a bit of stony ground near the sea. There was grass everywhere else in the field, even inside the ruins, except for this stony bit. It wasn't a rock. Just dry ground and pebbles. Ned said, "Grass doesn't grow on the grave of a saint. It's an old saying." '

As I told the story, I recalled every detail of the scene. The irises lining the stream that ran down through small fields to the sea. The sunlight glittering on the water. The wind whipping my hair into my eyes. The ancient, faded sign – Saint Dervla's Bed. Jack and Ned walking down the field and clambering over the dry stone wall on to the rocky strand. Me whispering, 'Dear God and Saint Dervla give me a baby.'

'I asked the saint for a baby,' I said. Alma, the great rationalist, was smiling. She'd heard it all before. The others had settled into relaxed, listening mode.

'The next day we drove to the wedding. Maybe Ned said something to Sister Monica. She was at the wedding. A relative of the bride's mother. A cousin, I think. She came over to me at the reception afterwards and said, "Mrs Molloy, I believe we can help each other." It turned out she was in charge of a home for unmarried mothers. Somewhere near Tullamore. There was this girl who'd just had a baby and she'd decided to give it up for adoption. It was a fine healthy baby. Did I want a baby?'

Rosemary gasped. Janet nearly shot out of her seat. I carried on with my story.

'Jack and I had talked about adoption. We'd even approached an agency in London. They told us there was a long waiting list. Years. And here was this nun saying, "Do you want a baby?" I was so stunned I didn't even ask if it was a boy or a girl.

' "I know you are good people",' she said. ' "My cousin has known your husband's relatives all her life. You'll give this innocent child a good home." '

'I've never heard anything like it,' said Rosemary. 'What did you do?'

'Jack and I sat up half the night talking. What should we do? It really was the answer to a prayer. But we weren't prepared. Mentally or any other way. Jack was more reluctant than I was. He was worried about the legalities. We didn't know what the law was. I assumed it must be OK if the nun could make the offer. We decided if it was all right legally, we'd adopt the baby. The funny thing was, Jack didn't ask if it was a boy or a girl either. It was as though I was pregnant and we didn't know the sex.'

As I recounted the story, I felt again the nervous exhilaration of that night. Jack pacing the hotel room, me sitting on the edge of the bed, gripping and regripping the blue candlewick bedspread.

'Next morning, Jack telephoned a cousin who was a solicitor in Dublin. He told us the law was perfectly straightforward. There was nothing to stop us adopting the baby if

the mother had given consent. Then we told Sister Monica we wanted the baby. And then we asked if it was a boy or a girl. She said, "It's a girl." '

I paused, remembering my tears, Jack gripping my hand. Sister Monica producing a folded white handkerchief, big as a tablecloth, from a pocket in her black robe.

'Tears of happiness I hope,' she said.

'I don't know how we managed,' I continued. 'We rushed about buying baby clothes and a carrycot and nappies. A cousin of Ned's was a chemist and he gave us bottles, and tins of baby milk, and plastic pants, and baby cream. We had boxes full of stuff. And then we went to this solicitor's office in Tullamore.

'The solicitor gave me a chair to sit on. I heard a car pull up outside the office. I shut my eyes I was so nervous. When I opened them, there was a young nun standing in front of me, holding a tiny baby in a pink blanket. "Here she is, Mrs Molloy," she said.'

I have always thought of that day as Mary's birthday, although she was about two weeks old by then. I took her in my arms. She gave a little murmur. I said, 'Does she have a name? Has she been baptised?'

'Yes,' said the nun. 'She was baptised in the hospital. Her mother called her Frances Mary.' Her hand jumped to her mouth. 'I'm not supposed to tell you that.'

'You get an amended birth certificate,' the solicitor said, 'with the name you give her.'

'We'll call her Mary,' I said. 'Can we add Dervla too?'

'You can call her whatever you like,' the solicitor said. 'It's an entirely separate document; a copy of her entry in the Adopted Children's Register. It becomes her official birth certificate.'

I looked at Jack. 'Frances Mary Dervla Molloy sounds right to me.'

'Me too,' said Jack.

'Dervla,' said the nun. 'My name's Dervla.'

'I thought that was a good omen,' I said. 'In fact, you'll think I'm silly, but I thought it was a sign from the saint.'

'I don't think you're silly at all,' said Rosemary. 'That's an amazing tale.'

The sun had dropped. Our shadows angled sharply across the table, and stretched across the floor to the skirting boards.

'What do you think the nun wants?' said Janet.

'I've no idea,' I said.

'Maybe she's been asked to pass on a message. Maybe Mary's— maybe somebody's got in touch and wants to know about her.'

She was going to say 'real mother'.

'You mean Mary's birth mother might have contacted

her?' I lightly emphasised the preferred term. 'That's possible.'

'Maybe she's an opera singer herself,' said Rosemary. 'All that talent must come from somewhere. Of course you and Jack encouraged her and made it all possible. But you know what I mean.'

'Isn't it nice you're going to be able to tell her that Mary's happy and successful,' said the ever-tactful Alma.

'Has she never telephoned before?' said Janet.

'Never.'

'Sometimes things happen in your life that make you want to revisit your past,' said Rosemary. 'When I turned fifty I got this great urge to contact all the girls I'd been at school with.'

'Maybe she's ill. Maybe she wants to find out about . . .' Janet rooted around again for the right word, 'about the baby she gave up. Before she . . . before she . . .'

'Dies?' I said. 'That's an uncomfortable thought.'

There was a moment's silence. Then we heard a car door slam outside.

'That'll be Harry,' said Janet. 'Time to go home. Give me a ring if you need any more help. And let me know what happens.'

'Me too,' said Rosemary. 'I'd better get back as well.' I walked with them to the front door, reiterating my thanks, and waved them goodbye.